

# DESOLATE ANGEL



Chaz McGee



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

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## The big push . . .

I had to move now. The box sat on the counter. It didn't weigh more than a couple pounds, but I had never moved a physical object in my present state before. I didn't even know if I could.

I stationed myself at the counter, reached over, and pushed. The box did not move. I could feel it, the cardboard had substance, but my pushing produced no resistance.

I thought of all I had failed to do in my life, all I had not even tried to do. I thought of Alissa, wandering the earth, appearing to me. I thought of the young girl dumped in the weeds. I was one of them. I was connected still, I told myself, or I would not be here.

The box moved. It slid over the edge of the counter and tumbled to the floor. Bags of evidence spilled onto the tile. And, instantly, I was overcome with a wave of acute pain. Every fiber of my being throbbed with an agony so intense that it brought me to my knees.

I had violated the boundaries of my world. And I would pay the price . . .

## *Praise for* DESOLATE ANGEL

“I do not want Kevin Fahey to rest in peace. I want him to hang around until he’s solved every one of the cases he bungled when he was a live detective. Happily, there are enough of those to let me look forward to many more hours of reading pleasure.”—Margaret Maron

“[A]n utterly captivating story about redemption and second chances. Chaz McGee has an irresistibly rueful, melancholy voice that invites readers to remember that we all make mistakes—and we all deserve a shot at redemption.”

—Laura Lippman

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*They say some men die and go to Heaven,  
while others are doomed to Hell.  
But for me, death was an awful lot like life:  
I went absolutely nowhere.*

# Prologue



A man lies dying on the grime-encrusted floor of an abandoned house on the banks of the Delaware. The air is heavy with the stench of human detritus and the whiskey sweat of fear. The man knows that he is dying, but after the first hot shock of bullet burrowing through flesh, he feels no pain. Instead, he feels the world falling away. Every ache he has ever felt, every regret he has ever ignored, every sorrow he has ever mourned—they evaporate into the ether. He does not care. He does not care about the man sprawled dead at his feet or the heavysset man breathing bourbon in his face. He does not even think of the wife and sons he will leave behind, nor of the badge that presses against his chest, inches from the bullet's entry wound.

Instead, he stares at the ankles of the man bending over him, seeing every thread of a frayed pants hem that has been, improbably, stapled back into place. He memorizes every crease in the worn leather shoe beneath it.

A crack has opened up in the shoe between leather and sole. It fascinates him, that tiny gap of darkness. It beckons him like an invitation. He stares at the sliver of darkness and thinks of one thing only, his death, like his life, defined by the same single, unanswerable question. He thinks, *How did it come to this?*

# Chapter 1



I never recognized my wife's beauty when I was alive. Distracted by shining eyes and an all-forgiving smile, I married her and stayed married to her for twenty-three years, never noticing when the shining eyes and forgiving smile faded, casualties of the burdens that came with loving me. But not once, in all the years of sharing the very air we breathed, did I recognize her true beauty.

I had to die before I saw it. I had to die before I realized how her stubborn love for me, and her infinite love for our sons, made her splendid beyond human comprehension.

I can see it now—and so much more. I can see the light that surrounds her when she holds our boys in her arms. I can see how the world surrenders before her when she shares that love with others. I have watched her stop to talk to the old man who lives alone next door and seen him smile to himself as he shuffles away afterward, his day brightened by more than memories. I have watched her eyes linger on strangers in the store where she works, noting their slumped shoulders and grim faces. And I have seen her smile at them from across a room crowded with racks of clothes—her smile instantly easing the weight of their unknown disappointments.

It is astonishing to me now that she stayed with me and loved me all those years. She deserved better. Through no fault of her own, I came to see her love as a burden, rather than a gift, and drank to forget that she loved me. When that did not drive her away, I sought out women willing to drink beside me in hopes of forgetting their own failures. I destroyed everything Connie had ever loved about me—and I don't why. And yet she loved me still.

I know that now, and so much more, for now that I am dead, I have little to do except ponder what I have lost. What else do you do when you

realize, too late, that you once had all you ever needed but refused to see it. *What do you do?* You try to hold on to what you have already lost. You chase the vapors of what you once had.

I sometimes linger behind the kitchen door, unseen by the living, waiting for my sons to burst in after school. Their hair stands up wildly from the cold, dry air and I savor the flash in their eyes as they realize they have a few hours of freedom before homework must begin. I watch as they push, joke, and torment one another. My sons. They are strength, hope, fear, hatred, love, and mayhem. Thanks to Connie, they are all I failed to be.

I spy, unnoticed, as my wife enters the kitchen and enfolds my sons in her arms. I long to feel the life that radiates from them, marked only by me.

All I can do is watch. I can no longer feel the warmth of flesh or caress the powdery silk of a child's skin or smell the inexpressible sweetness of their bodies. I can see. I can hear. I can bear witness to what I have lost. That is all.

I do not know why I ended up here, no longer of this earth, yet somehow bound to it. I am a solitary wanderer, forced to face a bitter truth: great love abides in the house that once was my home, but I am no longer a part of it.

In truth, I never was.

I have been dead for six months now and my passing has caused barely a ripple in their lives. Connie continues to work each morning at the department store; the boys continue to rush home from school to her embrace. I have seen them come together each evening now, time and again, without glimpsing an acknowledgment that I was ever there.

Perhaps I never really was.

It is this evidence of my failure that causes me to ponder my other regrets. You see, I failed others, too—and not just the victims, whose morgue photographs left a never-ending trail of human catastrophe winding through my unsolved files. I failed those they left behind as well. I think of them often, the surviving loved ones who came to me, seeking justice, and left with little more than despair. For, all too often, I used their tragedies to satisfy my craven need to fail, turning their calamities into excuses to drink away the hours, hoping to find that lost place where, at last, I could let myself care too little. I stared the other way when confronted by their misery, unable to meet their eyes. Eventually, I even avoided my own eyes

in the mirror and grew too ashamed to ever look back on the overwhelming condemnation of my failures.

Now, looking back is all I have.

I am a ghost haunted by my regrets, doomed to walk through a world that is neither here nor there, tasting my fate in my solitude, seeking a redemption I fear will never come.

My name was Kevin Fahey. I do not know what to call myself now.

I walk among the living, unseen and unheard, unsure if my continuing existence is evidence of Hell—or if I have somehow scraped my way into Purgatory. If so, if this is Purgatory, it is by the mercy of a forgiving universe, and through no effort of my own, that I am here.

I have tried to transcend my boundaries, but my translucent prison holds firm. I have stood at my wife's side as she lies in bed at night, murmuring to her of our time together before my surrender to eighty-proof despair, hoping to make myself heard. Hoping to make myself, at the very least, a memory.

It has all been in vain. I can feel no indication that Connie cares to remember what her life was like when I was in it. In fact, I can see no sign that anyone in my former world knows I am still here. I can perform wild fandangos across busy streets and cars don't even slow to avoid me. I can walk the sidewalks for hours, shout at the top of my lungs, jump up and down, waving my hands in faces: no one ever sees me. All I have earned for my desperate labors is the occasional quizzical look on a face, as fleeting as a twitch, or a sudden turn of the head, as if someone has glimpsed me out of the corner of an eye, only to lose me under full scrutiny.

Except once, just once, when a young boy saw me. That single incident gives me hope that I will not be alone forever. That hope keeps me wandering.

It happened two months after my death, when my ethereal existence was bitterly new. I was standing at the edge of a playground, watching my boys swing up against the brilliant blue of a cloudless June sky. They'd hang at the crest of their arc for a single, glorious second before dropping back to earth in a stomach-churning swoosh. The purity of their joy entranced me. I was transfixed—and so accustomed to being the watcher that it took me a moment to realize that I was being watched. It was not until an odd heat overcame me that I realized my solitude had been penetrated. I looked

down to find a small boy staring up at me, his eyes drawn to the gold badge pinned to my lapel.

“Is that real?” he asked. He was a pale child, sickly-looking, with deep shadows stretching like purple half-moons beneath weary eyes. His hair stuck up in odd clumps about a partially bald head. His legs were dusted with sand.

“Sure.” I knelt so he could get a better look. “I’m a detective.”

“Can I touch it?” he asked, his fingers inching toward my badge.

“Go ahead.”

Had he also passed to the other side? He was, undeniably, close. I could see it in his pallid eyes.

No. The boy was alive. His mother rounded the corner of a nearby storage shed and grabbed one of his hands. “Talking to trees?” she asked, shaking her head in exasperation as she dragged him away.

The boy stared after me, his face clouding over with a resigned recognition, as if he had realized what I must be—and understood that he, too, existed along the edge of two worlds. I waved my farewell, overcome with pity for what his future held, hoping that his mother’s fierce love could somehow save him from the loneliness of an existence like mine.

I never ran into the boy again, though I looked for him often among the faces of the children I passed. I felt such overwhelming love for him and I clung to this shred of humanity. Once I stood an entire week’s worth of afternoons by the playground sandbox, hoping to see my little friend again. But it was not to be. I do not know what happened to him. But he taught me the two things I have learned so far in my desolate wanderings: I am not the same man I was when I was alive, I have changed for the better, and that there may be some among the living who can, indeed, see me. They are my proof that I still exist and still have a chance at salvation. I just have to find them.

Those are the ones I seek.

This knowledge has kept me searching through the hallways of my former life, hoping to find a way back to the world of the living, a door to redemption or even just a passageway to what lies beyond.

Indeed, finding a way out of my solitary prison was my sole purpose for months upon months—until she came to me.



## Chapter 2



The evening was cold, at least to the living. I was standing in my yard at dusk, watching my boys leap into piles of autumn leaves. Their squeals filled the air with a contagious glee that went unnoticed by neighbors who were carting groceries, parking cars, and flicking lights on in their houses as a talisman against the coming darkness. No matter. I was there and I understood: the abandonment of their laughter was exquisite, as integral to the universe as church bells pealing across a meadow. No one heard it but me.

I was too distracted by my private joy to notice the girl at first. She appeared as little more than a glimpse of white in the dusk that was gathering behind the house next door. She emerged from the shadows as a young woman clad in a yellow sundress too flimsy for the cold October air. She came straight at me and I had not yet absorbed the shock of being seen when she raised a palm, as if ordering me to stay put, then moved forward with a languid grace as flowing as a brook over boulders.

Who was she and how did she know me? How was she able to see me? I felt the world shift beneath my feet, as if vast tectonic plates had clicked into place. A wild hope rose in me—had I, at last, found someone else among the living who could see me? Or, and my hope faded at the thought, had I found someone just like me?

She drew closer. I saw that she was barefoot, though the grass was touched with frost. Sure, the cold didn't bother me. But I was dead. Her feet had to be numb. Unless she was like me.

She kept moving forward, each step as ethereally precise as a ballerina's. She looked so frail I feared she might evaporate into a thousand wisps of smoke and be gone to me forever. She made no sound, and as her face came into view, I saw that she had been badly maimed, her beauty horribly marred by violence. Bruises bloomed in ugly purple splotches across her

face and shoulders, both of her eyes were blackened, and a trickle of blood ran from a corner of her mouth. Her yellow sundress was torn and drooped from her shoulders, yet she made no effort to rearrange it. Slowly, inexorably, she stepped closer until she stood only inches from me.

She stared into my eyes and I felt a darkness rise within me. It was an internal river so black and so deep and so terrible it threatened to flood my very soul with overwhelming hopelessness.

Somehow it came from her.

I was stunned at her closeness after so many months of solitude. Her eyes were unreadable, lost among the bruises. Her mouth moved, but no sound came out. She turned her head to look up at the sky—and that was when I saw the scar: a half-moon-shaped sliver of white at the corner of her right eye.

*Alissa Hayes.*

An almost electric shock ran through me as a wave of fear pulled me deep into the river of blackness. Alissa Hayes had been one of my rare successes in the last years of my fading career. One of the few cases I had actually solved.

*Why was she here now, with me?*

“Alissa,” I whispered.

She turned back to me, examining my face with an intensity I could not read. Then she took my hand and I actually felt her touch, the first physical sensation I’d had in months. Her hand wasn’t quite tangible, it was cold and without true substance, but it was undeniably *there*.

She pulled me forward and I followed as she led me, her hand in my hand, through yards and woods, parks and thoroughfares, fences and ponds. Barriers that stopped the living were nothing at all to us, for Alissa, too, had moved beyond the physical world. I knew because I had seen her sprawled among the weeds, body broken and drained of blood. I had seen her displayed on the cold steel of the coroner’s table, body reduced to meat. And I had been at her funeral, scanning the rows of the mourners with my partner, halfheartedly hoping that her killer might be discovered among them, thus granting us a rare victory.

And, indeed, we had solved her murder within a week.

*So why was she here with me, now?*

I had not failed her, not like I had failed the others. What could she want from me?

I kept following her, unwilling to relinquish the touch of another. Within minutes, without ever seeming to hurry, we were miles away, just beyond the small college whose campus encircled the north end of my town. We passed a pile of boulders and made our way up a hill that crowned the northern half of the county. It overlooked an abandoned canyon gouged into existence a hundred years before by quarrymen seeking granite. She led me still further up the hill, to a deserted field several hundred yards below the crest. A thick tangle of bushes gave way to forest above it. Few people ventured beyond the field.

I saw why we had come.

There, discarded among the weeds, a young woman was sprawled faceup, still and naked. Her slender body was as pale as bone in the moonlight; her delicate face bruised by both man and shadow. Her long brown hair had been arranged around her head in thick strands so that it flowed through the grass like seaweed undulating in a current. One of her arms was outstretched, as if in supplication, but her blue eyes were lifeless, reflecting the moon above her with a dull patina. The lower half of her body curved gracefully in a single arc, the feet bound together by a rope of twisted weeds, as if she were a mermaid caught in dry dock, left behind when the seas receded.

The air about the body was thick with a miasma I had never felt before, not in life and not in death. Whatever beauty had prevailed in this hidden spot was gone—and something ugly lived in its place.

Alissa and I stood staring down at the body. Welts had been cut into the pale skin of the young woman's stomach and thighs, as parallel and precise as gills. Alissa did not need to tell me what I now knew: I had been wrong about her death. I had been wrong about her killer. I had failed Alissa Hayes, after all. I had failed the young man in jail for her murder, too. And I had failed the brown-haired girl sprawled in the weeds before me.

## Chapter 3



I stood by the body as night deepened. Alissa had disappeared, but I was unwilling to leave the dead girl alone. I could feel no sense of her spirit, only the presence of a lingering evil that hovered over the clearing, its power so tangible it was almost as if it murmured to me, daring me to listen more closely. But I was not cowed. An unexpected power had filled me as I stood watch, a certainty that I had not been brought here to regret. I had been brought here to atone. I don't know what sent me the knowledge, or why it chose that moment to come into being, but a faith flowed through me as I stood watch in the night. I knew that I was supposed to be there. I knew that I had been called upon to bear witness to this cruelty for reasons I did not yet know. And I knew what I had to do next.

Alissa had led me here for the living, not for the dead girl sprawled before me. She had led me here because the man she had once loved was in prison for her murder while her real killer roamed free, still killing. The body before me was proof. My job was to stop him. I was dead, but I was still a detective. I had found my quest at last.

I would begin with what had happened to Alissa and the connections between her death and the one before me now. The death scenes were identical. I remembered it all with a vividness that my dispirited vision had missed the first time around: Alissa's hair displayed in the grass, the broken body presented to the elements as if it were an offering, the curve of the legs, an arm outstretched and beseeching, the rows of precise slits in the flesh, deliberate decorations of torture, like runes designed to bring forth evil spirits.

Seeing the crime repeated so precisely before me, I finally understood the power of human need. Both bodies had been arranged according to a desperate vision, the dump sites staged so some dark, unimaginable compulsion could play out to its end.

These were not crimes of passion, I realized. That had been my first mistake. These were crimes of privation, fed over time, triggered by an insatiable need that incubated slowly, nurtured by a conflation of despair and dispossession. Whoever had killed these young women treasured his need to torture as others treasured their gold. He reveled in his need to maim and kill.

The sudden clarity of my wisdom was breathtaking. I knew it all with a certainty: it would take unspeakable cruelty to create a human being capable of such evil. If I had understood that when I was alive, when Alissa was murdered, I'd have known that the man I put in prison for her death could never have reached such a point, would never have felt such a need.

I would have known he was the wrong man.

But what could I do about it now? There was little I could do but wait until the body was discovered.

The night passed and a new day dawned, the miracle of it unnoticed by most of the living. Alissa reappeared with the light and waited with me, the dead watching over the dead. She was either unwilling or uninspired to communicate with me and I felt no need to change that. She had played her part. She had brought me here. The rest was up to me.

Humans came and went in the distance as we stood watch in the clearing, keeping the dead girl company. The morning progressed and students hurried along the brick path far below us, unaware of the struggle between life and death that had been fought—and lost—so close to their own lives. It could have been any of them.

I wondered where the dead girl's essence had gone, why she did not join us in keeping watch, whether she was trapped as I was, on some plane that was neither here nor there. Or had she gone beyond me already, leaving me behind, and would I ever know?

There was little for me to do except to ponder the role I'd had in the young woman's death. I thought of the unalterable chain that led from my own indifference as a detective to an innocent man sitting in a prison cell, doing time for a murder he had not committed, while the real killer continued to kill.

If I had known how a single action could trigger a lifetime of consequences, how it could change other lives profoundly and forever, I would have been more careful when I was alive. I would have lived more

deliberately. I would have banished my regrets and robbed them of their power. I would have been more of a man.

I thought of Bobby Daniels, the young man I'd put in prison for Alissa's murder. What would it be like to be confined to a room barely larger than a coffin, breathing air thick with hatred spewed from others—others who had killed, maimed, and tortured, poisoning their very humanity—when you knew you had done nothing to be among them?

How could you hold on to your will to live in a world that allowed that to happen? How could you?

I'd never pondered such things before, never given another human being that much thought. But now I could think of nothing else. *What had I done?* I had taken away a life as surely as some unknown monster had taken the life of the girl sprawled before me.

Bobby Daniels had been Alissa's boyfriend at the time of her death—and easy to convict. He'd done nothing to protect himself against the probing, the theories, the accusations, the patched-together shreds of physical evidence that bound him to Alissa's death. We had thrown theory after theory at him, imagined scenarios leading to more scenarios—all of them culminating in Alissa's violent death. And Bobby Daniels had never once fought back. He'd accepted it all with a numb indifference.

I understood now that, perhaps, he had simply lacked the will to defend himself against the horror that had claimed him without warning. I understood that my self-absorbed heart had blinded me to the pain that other hearts could feel. That Bobby Daniels had been too consumed mourning the loss of Alissa to have noticed what was happening to him.

And I had set this injustice in motion.

The day faded. As the sun started its descent, its light thinned to a pale rose streaked with fingers of gold, an old man in a Burberry raincoat approached through this splendor, laboring up the hill with a sandy-colored dog. The dog was the first to find the dead girl. At first, I thought the creature was barking at me. I had learned soon after my death, while passing by my wife's cat, that some animals could see me, or at least sense me, and that they sometimes reacted to my presence. Kitzy had hissed at me relentlessly for weeks after my death, and at last, I had returned the favor, taunting her until she rose in a fury of arched back and spitting, a display that earned her a pillow thrown across the room by my unknowing wife.

Oh, I had enjoyed that battle many times before the cat had learned to accept me with the same disdain she'd bestowed upon me during my life. I rather missed our feuds once they were gone.

But no, this was not the case now. The little dog ignored me completely. He pulled the leash from the old man's hands and darted past me to the edge of the clearing. There, he dropped to his belly and crawled to the side of the girl's body, whimpering for his master to hurry.

The old man pushed through the bushes and discovered the dead girl just as the last rays of afternoon light bathed the clearing in gold, rendering her an offering to the gods. The old man grew still at the sight before him. I could feel his whole being grow heavy with the knowledge that such evil existed.

The old man had been a good man during his many years. I could feel that coming from him, too. He was not equipped for what he saw. I knew this because something astonishing was happening to me, perhaps triggered by my newfound feeling of purpose: memories of the old man's life unfolded in my mind, as if I were him and he were me. I knew in an instant who he had been and what had mattered to him. I saw a brown-haired woman walking along a beach, beckoning toward him to walk by her side. I saw laughing children running into his open arms, gleeful in the knowledge that they were well loved. I felt his sorrow as a loved one slipped away too young, her face pale against a hospital bed. I saw loyal friends, relatives spanning the generations, dinners filled with conversation and laughter, rooms crammed with books, children growing into adults, more nights, more rooms, more children, more laughter, and always, the man's grateful presence moving among it all, forming the bond that held his life together. He understood that he was the center of his universe, no one else, and he was grateful for what he had.

But I also knew that it was this life that had led the old man to this moment in it—and that he would never completely shed the sorrow he now felt. The world was not as he had hoped and the evidence was vividly before him.

Sadness infiltrated his body, filling him with an anguish that only human beings can feel. I was overcome with compassion for the innocence he had lost. Yet I also envied him his grief, for it was proof that he was among the living. And proof that I was not.

The old man collected himself, then pulled his whining dog away, commanding him to be silent. The little beast complied, lying down with his snout balanced on obedient front paws, waiting as his master knelt at the edge of the clearing and prayed for the dead girl.

I do not think he knew the young woman. I felt no connection between them, and yet, as he prayed, I was overcome with gratitude that this good man had been the one to find her. For I felt the evil that lingered around her body dissipate as his love for a stranger filled the air around us. I trembled at its power, humbled by my loss of that power, longing to feel it within me even as I understood that I had long ago surrendered my right to it.

Slowly, as the evil about the girl lifted, twilight descended over her with the gentleness of falling snow.

Done, the old man struggled to his feet and pulled a cell phone from his pocket. His voice was sad as he explained what he had found to the emergency operator, but his resolve was strong. No, he said firmly, he understood completely. Of course he would not leave until the police arrived.

He would not leave the poor girl alone.



## Chapter 4



Emergency vehicles gathered in the street below as paramedics and officers hurried up the hill. I moved into the shadows, though I knew they could not see me. I watched as my old partner, Danny, came huffing up the final stretch, his face red from exertion.

Danny Bonaventura. He had been the last person to see me alive, but I did not remember anything about my death except his face looming over mine. Unlike earlier memories, the final moments of that night remained a mystery. I remembered only that Danny and I had gone to the row house to interrupt a drug buy involving a murder suspect. I remembered that Danny had been tipped at the last minute and we had rushed there without backup, against regulations, hoping to nail a man we knew was responsible for seven deaths. My desire to apprehend him had been real. I was never callous, even in my last, most shameful days. I still clung to the thought that I was one of the good guys. That night, I'd figured I might get lucky and do some good, without a whole lot of effort, maybe even in time to stop off for a drink afterward.

Instead, I had died. My life had simply—and suddenly—ended. I still did not understand how.

I'd been drunk, of course, deep in the alcoholic fog of my life, my judgment perpetually impaired and my desire to stay in that fog overwhelming all other priorities. But I was not convinced my drunkenness had been a factor in my death. Why could I not remember?

I remembered a chilly darkness in the room. I remembered the scuttling of rats across the linoleum floor as they made their way through the garbage that drug users leave behind: stained mattresses scavenged from the streets, old needles, cheap wine bottles, used condoms, candy wrappers. I remembered the smell of the alcove where I waited. It reeked of urine and mold and the whiskey sweat that rose from my skin. I also remembered the

whisper of Danny's voice next to me and his familiar, bourbon-soaked breath. But then I remembered nothing, except for Danny bending over me, his nose swollen from years of drinking, his sparse ginger-colored hair gleaming with sweat and grease. After that, my old life had faded, pulling in like the aperture of a camera closing on a brightly lit scene, leaving no room for details.

To have lived my life as a drunk was bad enough, but to have died as a drunk as well? What a waste. I had missed even that most pathetic of endings.

I could remember nothing more until I'd found myself standing, unseen, at the back of a room, observing my own funeral, knowing, somehow, that I was dead. It was a real Tom Sawyer moment, if Tom Sawyer had lived in Hell.

There was Connie, sitting rigid, her face reflecting her inability to understand what she was truly feeling. Relief, I suspected, just as I suspected that the only real sorrow she might feel was for my sons, who sat on either side of her, solemn and confused.

As each person who had been tapped for the job of eulogizing my sorry ass rose to remember me, the blatant untruth of their words hit me with a cruel clarity. These were the people I was supposed to have loved, but I had not loved them enough. And, yet, they could not face up to my failure to do so. They chose to remember a different reality. It was a bitter pill to be redeemed by their generosity. A state beyond sobriety had come to me in death and I no longer possessed the comfort of illusions. I saw them not as my loved ones, but as a parade of the betrayed. And I heard every word they spoke not as a tribute, but as a rebuke for what I had failed to do. I wanted to die as I listened. But that comfort, too, had been taken from me. I was already dead.

I had blown it all, even my own death. And my partner Danny had been a partner in that final failure. That the last thing I'd seen in life was his face seemed a travesty to me. He had appreciated life far less than I had—why should he now get to symbolize it for me?

But as I watched him struggle up the hill, I was beginning to understand that we neither choose nor deserve our path in life. That the best we can do is to keep going through the days that open up before us. My path had led

me to my death, a death forever tied to Danny, and now Danny's path was leading him here, to this clearing filled with yet more death.

I wondered if Danny was losing it completely. He wore no tie and his badge dangled carelessly from the stained lapel of a too-tight navy jacket. His breath was little more than ragged gusts as he rested after laboring up the hill. The paramedics passed him easily, though he'd had a head start: they were not necessarily younger, not all of them, but they were clearly far more fit.

Not that haste yielded them any benefit. The paramedics saw at once that their presence at the scene was useless. They turned back and acquiesced to those whose job it was to help the dead.

Helping the dead. That had been my job once and I had failed at it. To now be an observer, to have the luxury of sobriety and an undefined understanding of the people who moved before me made this death scene seem completely new, though I had been at dozens such scenes while alive. I sat on a log and balanced my chin on my hands, like a spectator in the front row of a theater, watching my old coworkers move about.

They treated the body with tender respect, a ritual, I knew, that they believed protected them against their own demise. Yet I also knew that the body was nothing more than chemicals now, that all essence of the young woman was gone. In truth, they were worshipping a god long since departed.

The old man and his dog had been relegated to the outskirts of the circle where yellow tape held onlookers at bay. The man's sadness was palpable.

It was then—in the midst of sorrow and death, like a flower blooming among the ashes in the aftermath of fire—that my life-that-was-not-quite-a-life changed for all eternity. All because of her, a woman I had never seen before.

She appeared from behind a stand of trees, ducked under the crime scene tape, and stopped to talk to the old man who had found the body. When she placed a hand on his shoulder to steady him, I could feel his trembling as surely as she must feel it. Whatever resolve he had mustered failed in the face of her sympathy, but she understood and was willing to lend him her strength.

She leaned close to him, murmuring in his ear, then distracted him with rapid questions asked in a detached, official voice. Dredging up memories

of authority, the old man reclaimed himself, provided answers, listened closely, and somehow got through it all. He took her business card when it was offered, placing it in his coat pocket for safe-keeping. The woman shook his hand when they were done, knelt to pat the little dog on his head, then helped the old man under the tape and instructed a uniformed guard to escort him down the hill through the darkness. Kindness. She was kindness and she was strength.

I was fascinated by her by the time she began to pick her way through the weeds, coming ever closer to the body, scrutinizing each patch of ground with the help of a flashlight before she put her foot down on it. As she drew closer, I saw that she was in her mid-thirties and had ordinary brown hair that hung to her shoulders limply. She was neither beautiful nor ugly. She was not quite plain, but she was not quite pretty, either. But her eyes were extraordinary. Dark brown flecked with gold, shining with a resolve that made them glow in the reflection of the lights being set up around the perimeter of the crime scene. Her pants suit fit her stocky body as if it had been sewed onto her, rendering her movements effortlessly athletic.

She lived in her body, I realized, unlike most of the people I'd scrutinized since my death. I'd come to learn that people were at war with their flesh, that they lived in their heads, or spent too much time with their memories, or lingered over lost dreams like I did. They did their best to ignore the fluids and corpuscles that bound them. But not this woman. She didn't just live in her body, she celebrated it with the way she moved, every synchronized sweep of muscle a homage to life. I could not take my eyes off of her. She was gloriously, completely, and irresistibly alive.

She was also all business. She gave no hint of noticing anyone else, not even Danny, as she knelt to examine the body.

"Maggie, Maggie, Maggie," Danny said, as if he were ashamed of something.

She did not respond.

"Where you been?"

She did not look up as she answered. "Paperwork. Where have you been?"

Danny pulled out a mint and popped it into his mouth, a gesture I had seen a thousand times. "Dinner break," he mumbled.

"You didn't get a chance to talk to the old man when you got here?"

“Thought I’d better guard the body.”

Ah, yes, *Danny*, I thought, *do guard the body*. Keep watch. Mount surveillance. Do whatever it took to do absolutely nothing. I’d been there. I’d done that. I’d perfected the art of nothingness with him and I was ashamed.

Maggie ignored my old partner. She was shining her flashlight over the dead girl’s body, examining every inch of it, unwilling to concede the interpretation of evidence to the forensic crew. That alone made her a better detective than Danny or I had ever been in all of our years on the force.

“This poor kid can’t be more than nineteen or twenty,” she said to the techs waiting at a distance. She touched the dead girl’s cheek tenderly. “Make sure you get everything.”

Most of the forensic techs were new. I’d never seen them before. At least one of them was affronted.

“When did we ever miss anything?” he complained.

“I’m going to stand watch while you work anyway,” Maggie said pleasantly. “It helps me put things together. I want you to walk me through everything as you bag it.” She diluted her mistrust with a smile that transformed her face into something close to beautiful. And it worked. The techs went to work efficiently, announcing each find, as Maggie scribbled the details in her notebook.

She stood watch for hours as they scraped, plucked, pulled, and bagged. She stood watch with a stillness that approached mine. I could not bear to leave her. She exuded the life that I had lost and a purposefulness I found breathtaking. She epitomized all that I had wanted to be then given up on being. As time passed, I found her plainness to be exquisite. Her ordinary features formed a perfect blank canvas for the nuanced expressions that played across her face as she worked.

During those hours, my attention wavered from Maggie only once—when Alissa Hayes emerged from where she had been waiting inside the nearby grove, less certain than me that her presence could not be detected by the living. She paused in front of me, her eyes filling with tears. Her mouth moved, but, still, no sound came from her. I could not understand what it was that she was trying to tell me. She held a hand out, shoulder high, then pointed toward herself. I shook my head, not understanding, wondering anew why our paths had crossed here. It was not just her old

boyfriend, languishing in jail. It was something else. I was still missing something.

But I did not miss the irony: I was a ghost haunted by another ghost.

Alissa stared at me. I could feel her despair. But her thoughts were cloaked in darkness. I tried to communicate, but could not penetrate beyond. She turned abruptly, frustrated, and disappeared down the hill, her departure marked only by me.

Maggie never looked up. She had never stopped watching the body as it was processed, photographed, and finally, moved. Danny had long since trudged down the hill, having never even taken his notebook from his breast pocket.

And, I realized, having never once said a word to his new partner about the connection between this murder scene and Alissa Hayes so long ago. Had he truly not noticed the similarities? Was he that far gone?

Or had he simply been unwilling to admit to Maggie that he—that we—had made a terrible mistake?

Maggie gave no notice of Danny's leaving. She had eyes for the dead girl only. When the body was finally lifted onto a gurney, Maggie examined the spot in the weeds where the girl had lain. She got down on her knees, joining the forensic techs, running her fingers over the ground, placing the flat of her palm against the earth as if she was gauging the heartbeat of the world itself. When they were done, she let the others go, but seemed reluctant to leave the scene herself. She walked toward me and I froze. But she did not sense my presence. She sat down on the log next to me, inches away, her hands placed neatly on her knees as she stared straight ahead, absorbing the stillness of the night.

An exquisite shock ran through me. I experienced a sensation like that of losing my breath. It was the closest to being human I had felt in six months. I stood abruptly, fearful of her nearness, but she did not react. I touched her hair. Not a muscle twitched. Her head was tipped back now, her face to the stars, her features still. Was she searching the heavens? Smelling the air? Listening for the sounds of another?

She was alone except for a uniformed officer who stood guard further down the hill. Being alone did not seem to bother her. Unlike every other human I had watched over the last six months, she fit her solitude and her solitude fit her.

I touched her shoulders, unable to resist. She shivered and pulled a cell phone from her pocket. With the press of a button, she had someone on the line. I wondered if it was a lover.

“It’s me,” she said. “It’s a bad one this time. A student, I think.”

She was silent as she listened. “Yes, I was careful. No, he didn’t stay long. It’s going to be up to me.”

She was silent again, then said, “I never knew the guy. But I doubt he was as bad as Bonaventura. I don’t think anyone could be as bad as Bonaventura.”

She shook her head in response to something she heard. “I’m not going to judge him,” she said. “He did the best he could. Let him rest in peace.”

She mumbled a good-bye and stored the phone back in her pocket as a shameful realization washed over my being: *Maggie had been talking about me.*

## Chapter 5



I could not bear Maggie's sympathy—nor the thought of what she might think of me when she found out I'd helped convict an innocent man. I had to make it right. I could not leave a man in prison for a crime he did not commit. Nor could I allow the evil I had felt in the clearing on the hill to roam free.

I would need help to make it right. But who among the living could help me? Not my wife. I had tried to communicate with her for months and failed. Maggie had not seen me, either. No one living had, except for the dying boy, that one time. Who, then, could help me set things right?

With shame, I recognized my best hope—the person I had been most like when I was alive—and set out to find him.

I discovered Danny in Shenanigan's, a dive bar off La-Salle Street a few blocks from the house where Connie and my sons lived. Danny and I used to stop there for a pop whenever we got called out on a run. It was a low-rent hole-in-the-wall, filled with old men pickling themselves to death and tired women who looked older than they were, yet probably felt even older than that.

I used to feel so at home when I pushed through the front door. The warm air would wrap around me, beckoning me inside. The old men would look up and call out my name, gesturing for me to join them. I was a hero in there, a man not yet put out to pasture. I had thought of the bar as a cocoon that protected me from the disappointments waiting outside its doors.

Now it seemed like little more than a waiting room for death, a place of false hope and seductive inertia. A place where life leaked away and people squandered the time they had left. A place to give up, then deaden yourself against the knowledge that you had given up.



The air was suffocating, heavy with the smell of unwashed clothing and stale beer. The regulars sat hunched on their stools, staring into glasses of liquor or beer, occasionally glancing up at an old television that flickered images without sound. Even time seemed to slow in some cruel show of power. So you wanted it all to end? Well, sit down, buster, and take a number. Because you've got a long wait ahead of you.

Danny sat at the far end of the bar. It was not yet ten o'clock in the morning, but he had three empty shot glasses arranged in front of him and two more on deck. He'd taken a break from the bourbon to nurse a pint of beer. I remembered just how the beer tasted: slightly bitter, slightly flat—as vaguely disappointing as the life you were trying to forget.

Had I really looked that beaten down when I had been one of them?

Danny spoke to no one. He never even looked up. I waited, perched on an empty stool nearby, trying to get a sense of what he was thinking, what he was feeling, trying to find a way in that I could connect to. All I could discern was blackness, as cold and unfathomable as the bottom of the sea. I knew I would never be able to penetrate his thoughts. He was too far gone. To me and to the world. He would be of no help in bringing justice to Alissa Hayes and the girl who now lay on a steel slab in the morgue, name unknown, attended to by strangers. I could not even tell if Danny saw the connection between the old and new murders.

Danny was darkness. Danny was lost to me.

I checked out the other customers. There were half a dozen patrons this early in the day, only one of them a woman. She was drinking alone in a corner, smoking cigarette after cigarette, determined to fill her body with enough poison to take her away from whatever it was that caused her such pain. Watching her, I experienced a stab of compassion so acute it was as if a knife blade had penetrated the core of my heart and scooped out a slice to offer her. I was filled with a deep and abiding love for what she had given the world and failed to receive in return.

As I stared at her, a scene unfolded in my mind. I was sharing in her memories: a not-yet-middle-aged woman, beauty fading from neglect, sitting by the bedside of a dying old man. She is holding his hand and murmuring away his fears, assuring him that he does not need to be afraid, she will stay with him and he will not be alone. His terror leaves him and the old man closes his eyes, finding refuge in the sleep of the comforted.

There is love in the room, as tangible as the handmade quilt folded over the end of the bed. But I know, as surely as anything I have ever known, that when the old man dies and finds his peace, his love for his dutiful daughter will die with him—and she will be the one left alone.

Just as I reached the end of this memory with her, the woman in the bar looked up at me, as if I'd spoken to her. Had she seen me? Could she feel me there? I waited, stunned. But, no, she glanced down, shaking it off, then picked up a shot glass of amber liquid and drained it. The moment had passed. Our connection was severed.

We were both left alone.

No one here would be of help to me. While I had once treasured the warm glow that the shots of bourbon gave me and thought of them as blessed release, I saw now that the more these people drank, the denser the air around them grew, until they were trapped in a carapace of hopelessness that was closer to death than to living.

I had to get out of there.

I escaped and stood outside on the sidewalk, waiting for Danny to leave. I knew he would have to report to the station eventually, even with his new partner, Maggie, picking up the slack. But when he finally stumbled out half an hour later, he did not head to his car. He turned down the block and walked toward my old neighborhood, causing curtains to flutter in windows as he staggered past. I followed him, the tail end of an invisible parade, watching the gloomy cloud he carried from the bar lighten in the light of a crisp winter day.

When he reached my block, he leaned against a tree several houses down from my yard and stared at my front door. I knew no one was home. Connie was still at work, the boys still at school.

Why was he here?

Did Danny miss me that much?

I would be astonished if that was the case. Though we'd had a friendship right out of the academy, after his divorce he had withdrawn into a sullenness that had persisted ever since. He had talked very little over our years together, done even less, disappeared often, and seldom expressed an opinion about the cases we were given. If I was unmotivated, Danny was petrified, light-years ahead of me when it came to inertia. No wonder we had been sloppy and closed so few cases while working together.

I had no illusions. Danny had not cared for me.

I could do nothing but wait while he stared at my house, grappling with unknown desires. Nearly half an hour passed before I saw what Danny had been waiting for: my wife's car pulled up in our driveway, all the way up to the top of it, near the side door, in a place that had been cluttered with bicycles and sports equipment when I was alive. Connie climbed out of the driver's side, then the passenger door opened and a man I had never seen before stepped out. He was tall and trim, with graying hair, and wore gold-rimmed glasses that made him look kind. He was a few years older than Connie. He followed her to the side of the house, his back turned to the neighbors as she fumbled to unlock the back door and let them both inside.

What was my wife doing at home in the middle of the day? Who was this man?

Danny stayed in the shadows of his watching place, but I had no such scruples. Invisibility has its advantages and I was curious. What secret lives we all lead, I thought.

I approached the kitchen door with no sense of guilt, nor could I feel any sense of jealousy, either. Such worldly feelings had apparently left me, along with resentment and the other petty emotions that erode our ability to love.

If someone else loved Connie, I would be glad for her. I had loved my wife once, and I felt a need, still, to look after her and my sons as best I could, perhaps to make up for how little I had looked after them when I was alive. Besides, I understood that I was gone from her life and that what she now thought of me was irrelevant. Connie's life went on—and she deserved to be loved in a way I had never been able to give her.

I stayed only long enough to see that this man had been in my home before. He was not a stranger passing through. He belonged. Connie left him alone in the kitchen, yet he moved from cabinet to table to refrigerator with ease, pulling out plates and glasses, pouring wine, setting out a platter of cheese and slicing a pear while he waited for my wife to reappear. When she returned, she was wearing a pale blue nightgown and a matching robe edged with lace.

"I knew you would look beautiful in it," the man said to her. He pulled her to him and buried his face in her hair, uncaring that it was streaked with gray, seeing only my wife's beauty.

Connie put her arms around him and they kissed, then the man laughed and picked up a slice of pear. He fed Connie half, and ate the rest himself. "Are you happy?" he asked.

She nodded, beyond words, and my heart swelled with joy for my wife. I had never seen her look so beautiful; I had never felt her feel so beautiful before.

"How long do we have?" the man asked. I could tell that he was a kind man, a man unencumbered by lies or other obligations. A man with the freedom to think of nothing at this moment but my wife, and her loveliness, and the time they had together.

"The boys will be home in two hours," she said. "You must have all your clothes back on by then." She laughed. "They'll be happy you're back in town."

He bent down and kissed her, enfolding her in his arms, and I knew the time had come for me to leave. This was no longer my life and this scene was not destined to be my memory.

It was time to let Connie go. Forever.

I left my old house with an unexpected feeling of freedom and a certainty that my time there was done. I would return, I knew, to watch my boys grow into men, but I would not and could not be the one responsible for them. I knew now that someone else would. What I had failed to do, this man would do for me, repairing my inattention, showing them love, shepherding them into adulthood. And he would do a better job than I could ever have done.

I felt nothing but gratitude toward him.

As I passed the tree where Danny stood brooding under the branches, still staring at my house, I patted my old partner on the back. He jumped, his reaction dulled by alcohol. A goose had walked over his grave.

I was both bemused and sad for him. *Whatever dreams you had about Connie are gone, my friend*, I thought. *You have my sympathies.*

Danny had finally had enough. He pulled his coat tightly around him and shivered, then stumbled over the tree roots as he fell back into the sunlight. He marched to his car with the exaggerated posture of a drunk, fooling no one who saw him stagger by. I hitched a ride back to the station with him, exuberant with a freedom I had not expected, ready for something new.

I discovered a childish joy in examining the backseat, a place where I had often shoved perpetrators or relegated bums but never actually sat myself.

I found wads of gum parked on torn vinyl, scraps of paper bearing phone numbers, crumpled business cards, initials scratched into plastic. People were funny, I thought. They had a need, somehow, to prove that they had been there. They placed such importance on a cumbersome existence that I now knew was merely one form of many.

For the first time since my passing, I felt a stirring of joy that I was what I was and that I was where I was. And at that moment, a door opened in my mind. It gave off a light. I tried to cling to my epiphany, but it evaporated.

And yet, it promised me hope.

## Chapter 6



My newfound sense of freedom opened the door to emotions I had not realized I still had. Though I'd thought I was beyond such things as infatuation, it felt as if my whole world stopped when I followed Danny into the station house and found myself within a few inches of his new partner. Maggie was sitting at my old desk, scrutinizing a case folder opened before her. She had showered and changed clothes. Her hair was wet and pulled back carelessly in a ponytail. She had been in too much of a hurry to get back to work to bother to dry it.

Something new infiltrated my existence as I stood near her. At first I did not realize what it was. Then I had it: I could smell again. Maggie smelled of citrus.

I inhaled the air around her deeply, thinking how fitting it was that she smelled of oranges and sunshine. She did not look as if she had stayed up all night processing a crime scene. She was clean and alert, busily cross-checking items, so absorbed she barely glanced up when Danny sat down beside her.

"Got held up," he explained and I heard the old familiar slur in his voice. Had I been like that, that clueless about how I appeared to others? Deluded into thinking that no one would notice what a mess I was?

"I gathered as much," she answered, without emotion. I winced. Danny was as dead to her as I was. I felt a stab of sympathy for my old partner.

"Anything I can do to help?" he asked, as if it were perfectly natural for a nineteen-year veteran to be looking to his younger female partner for the lead.

"Not until we know who she is." Maggie took in his disheveled appearance. "You want to head down to Missing Persons and light a fire under their tail? Maybe check the college registrar after that to see if a coed's gone missing?"

“Will do,” Danny said, shuffling off. I knew he was relieved to be leaving her. Her refusal to judge him was more awful than contempt might have been. It meant he was not even worth her appraisal.

I sat in Danny’s chair and watched Maggie work. She had astonishing concentration. After a few minutes staring at the list of evidence that had been collected at the crime scene, she picked up the phone. I knew she was calling the lab. I had done it myself many times, usually because of a lack of inspiration on my end.

“How long?” she asked into the phone. She looked so disappointed at the answer that I could not bear to simply watch.

I would help her.

I made my way through the halls of the law enforcement building, my senses hyperalert. I had gained more than my sense of smell back. Everything around me appeared in ultra-relief. I could see the brushstrokes in the green paint slapped haphazardly on the walls. Every piece of grit on the floor twinkled as if it were diamond dust. And every person that passed, from clerk to perpetrator, exuded a distinct smell that triggered a visual composite consisting of random images from their lives. It was fascinating and horrifying at the same time to read each person who passed me by.

I learned that Morty, who had walked a beat downtown for twenty-eight years, had discovered loneliness in his advancing years. A crack addict was hauled past by a pair of uniformed officers and I knew at once that he had been scalded with hot water by his mother as a child, the memory now hidden under a callus of near-constant unconsciousness. And my old lieutenant, a man I had thought of as rigid and impenetrable, was in love, but afraid of telling the woman—who worked in the public relations department—for fear of being thought old and foolish. That made me the saddest of all. I wanted to tell him to at least try, before it was too late, but of course he could not see or hear me.

By the time I reached the laboratory, I felt like an empty vessel that had been filled with the lives of others. I was connected to every person who breathed in that building at that moment, a keeper of their hopes and fears. It left me both stunned and determined.

I knew I could find a way to get through to Maggie. I knew that she would be the one who could help me set things right.

I recognized the figure on a stool near the front door of the lab, peering through a microscope. Peggy Calhoun had been perched on that stool for the past twenty-five years. She was many pounds overweight and had long since grown too old for anyone to give her a second glance. Her red hair was obviously dyed, piled high and pinned haphazardly in a bun that listed to one side. Her black glasses had slid down to the tip of her nose and her lipstick was smeared, as always. Danny and I had made fun of Peggy ceaselessly when I was alive, speculating that she lived with a dozen cats and celebrated Christmas alone with a bottle of Amaretto and takeout from Nikko's. How cruel we were to have rejoiced in someone else's loneliness when all we had to show for our own sorry lives was an unceasing ability to cause the ones who loved us pain.

There had been a time, many years ago, when Peggy, in her own clumsy way, had let me know that she had a thing for me and was willing to prove it. But that had been lifetimes ago, for both of us, and I had not considered her offer seriously, knowing even then that she believed me to be far better than I would ever be. I had caused her pain, I could feel it in her still, but I had not caused her that pain out of indifference. Not back then. The truth was I'd been afraid of letting her down by who I really was. Now I realized that her belief in the best of others had been all the reaching out that she could manage in the solitary life she had chosen for herself. And that her belief in the best of me would have been a gift had I been able to accept it. I felt as if I owed her an apology of sorts. But I did not know where to start.

Instead, I watched her work while a new understanding of her opened before me. Peggy's real world came alive in her microscope. It was her window to discovering magical landscapes on the most ordinary of surfaces. Peggy not only shunned the wider world, she longed to live among the miniscule wonders of the objects she searched each day. She saw beauty in the rough surfaces she examined for evidence. She saw each grain, each ridge, every imperfection, as evidence of divine creation, proof positive that a greater hand was at work. Perhaps it was this certainty that made it impossible for her to truly be a part of the human race, with all of its folly. And, if so, was it so bad that she had reached out to others only when the basic needs of her heart made it necessary? She was truer to herself than most. Why had I not seen that before?

Maybe Peggy could help me.



After all, she saw beyond the ordinary every day. Maybe she could guide Maggie toward reopening the Alissa Hayes case. I knew all Maggie had to do was glance at the file and she would instantly see the connections between the two murders—though she'd have nothing but contempt for Danny once she realized he had either chosen to stay silent about the connection or, worse, not seen the similarities at all.

Evidence bags from last night's crime scene were stored in a cardboard box on the counter by Peggy's elbow. She was funneling them to the proper specialist for examination. She had placed three small bags to her left, awaiting her own scrutiny, and had processed nearly a dozen more, separating them into piles for further analysis. I stared at the bags, searching my memory, trying to identify something among the evidence that would make it obvious that this latest murder was connected to Alissa Hayes. I remembered so little beyond the initial crime scene.

Why had I not paid more attention when I was alive?

What had we nailed Alissa's boyfriend on? It would have been something obvious as Danny and I had been incapable of spotting more. Bobby Daniels had been a student, just like Alissa. He'd also been a real Poindexter, neat and clean in his pressed jeans and starched flannel shirts and shiny work boots. Who the hell starched their flannel shirts? His hair was clipped short and his little glasses had sat on his nose so precisely that I had loathed him on sight. It was as if his very being was there to mock my own sloppiness, to make it more obvious that I clawed through each day barely managing to hold it together.

I had let my self-loathing and dislike of him interfere with my judgment. That had been the first step I took down the wrong path. Where had it led me?

I remembered a little more. He had been a geology major and classmate of Alissa's. That was how they had met. When we first tied the crime to him, it was simply because it was an easy connection. There had been fingerprints on her belongings found at the scene, plus his hair and fibers from his hiking jacket were found on her body—though that could have been explained by their relationship had he bothered to try. His DNA, too, was present, but the boy had not denied that the two of them had slept together the night before Alissa's death. What other evidence was there? I tried to remember more.

Maybe a look at the evidence from the new murder would help. I moved closer to the box and Peggy looked up abruptly, as if sensing me there. I froze, but she returned to her microscope. That was when I saw it. A plastic bag of sandy granules collected from underneath the dead girl's foot, a glittering mixture of fine grains that did not belong at the scene. Maggie had discovered the substance and directed the techs to bring the grains back to the lab.

Similar granules had been on the few items of clothing found at the Alissa Hayes crime scene. I knew it with certainty. I just needed Peggy to realize it.

"Detective Gunn," Peggy said, looking up at the doorway.

Maggie Gunn? Her name was Maggie Gunn. It was so perfect for her.

She entered the lab with a smile. "Hey, Peggy. How's Mr. Whiskers?"

"Better. Antibiotics helped."

"How does one give a mouse antibiotics anyway?"

"Very, very carefully."

As the two women laughed, I joined in their delight. Of course—Peggy raised mice, not cats. Cats would be too big. Mice would be just right for her, with the perfection of their precise whiskers and tiny paws.

People, too, were fascinating, I realized, so perfect in their own way.

"How's your dad doing?" Peggy asked.

Already they had exchanged more personal information than Peggy and I had exchanged in twenty years of working together.

"Okay. It's hard on him," Maggie said. "They were married a long time."

"I know. Did you know I was sitting at a table next to them the night they had their first date?"

Maggie seemed surprised. "You're kidding!"

Peggy's eye twinkled. "Sal's. Far right corner. Your mother ordered linguine with clam sauce. Your father had veal chops. Neither one of them saw anyone else in the restaurant but each other. I knew your father from his beat, and I knew your mother from the beauty shop. But most of all—I knew they'd be together from that night on. You could just see it."

Maggie pulled up a stool and sat. "You never told me that."

"It was one of the most romantic moments of my life," Peggy admitted, and then, she had the great, good grace to laugh at herself.

As the women laughed together, I was filled with the knowledge that all people were connected by a great web of comings and goings, moments of passing through each other's life, moments of touching one person, who then touched another, and on and on through the years, an ongoing, never-ending river. I could have been a part of it, if only I had been able to see beyond my own miserable shell. My ripples could have mattered. I could have been a part.

"Find anything good?" Maggie asked.

Peggy shook her head. "Got a name for the victim?"

"Not yet. Danny's with Missing Persons. Maybe he'll get a hit."

Peggy glanced at her, not saying anything.

"He can't do any harm down there," Maggie said in his defense. "After that, he's heading over to the college to see if anyone's been reported missing."

They were silent until Maggie asked, quietly, "Was he always like that? So . . . disheveled and sad?"

"Oh, no," Peggy said. "Not always. He and Kevin were a real pair when they came out of the academy. Full of themselves. Cocky like every single other person who came through there back then. And they were something else to look at. Good-looking. Smart. Both of them. They were quite the pair. The women clerks would fight to be the one to help them." She looked around for a moment, then focused her attention on a small shelf tucked in the darkness underneath her computer keyboard. "Let me show you something." She rummaged behind some stacks of phone books and technical manuals, then produced an old framed photograph of Danny and me, before the bottle got us both. Dust covered its surface. She used a chamois cloth to wipe the photo clean. "Take a look. You'll see what I mean."

Maggie took the photo from her and brought it into the light. It was like being scalded, knowing that her incredible scrutiny was now focused on me. "God, Danny is like, what, half his size? And he has all of his hair."

"It was a long time ago."

"What's with the rifles and hunting vests?"

"They helped track down a triple-homicide suspect who got loose in Ronkonkoma State Park and was terrifying the local campers."

"That's not what I think it is, is it?"

“It is.” Peggy laughed, but Maggie looked horrified and I knew then what photograph Peggy had given her. Five years into the job, Danny and I had helped bring down a true psychopath. Well, we had helped flush him out of the woods and then hung out along the edges while the real snipers brought him down with a shot to his left calf. After he had been handcuffed and bound by the ankles, Danny and I had had the bad taste to pose above him, guns held aloft, my booted foot hovering an inch above his torso, as if he was a deer we had just brought down. It had become a famous photo in the department, or an infamous one, depending on your reaction to it. I’d stopped looking at it a good ten years ago, unable to decide what made me more ashamed: that I had ever been so cocky or that I had long since stopped having any reason to be cocky at all.

“You had to know the two of them to understand that photo,” Peggy said. “Things were different back then.”

“I guess so.” Maggie sounded distracted. She was staring intently at my image and my body felt as if it were filling with embers. I glowed with the knowledge that she was thinking of me.

“Not bad, eh?”

Maggie smiled. “Not bad at all. Just my type.” She looked up at Peggy. “Tall, dark, and handsome. And full of himself.”

Peggy’s face turned suddenly sad. “He could have been a legend,” she said more softly.

“What happened?” Maggie asked, still staring at my photo.

“Life.” Peggy started to return the photo to its hiding place at the back of the shelf, but stopped. “Life happened. Here—you take the photo.”

“Me?”

“Yes,” Peggy decided. “I think he would have wanted you to have it.”

Maggie looked puzzled, but took the photograph anyway. “Thanks. I find it, well, I guess strangely compelling.”

“He had that effect on people. For a while. But I think the job got to him. That happens to some people. They just aren’t equipped. You see so many terrible things. The things people do to one another.”

Maggie thought about that without comment and I felt her attention slipping away from me. I wanted to jump in her face, to scream that I was there, to prove that I was still worthy of her notice, if only as a fleeting thought.

I didn't matter to her. "Nothing unusual?" she asked Peggy, who had turned back to the comfort of her microscope. Their minds were back on the case.

Peggy shook her head. The rhinestone chain that clipped her glasses to her collar danced in the light, reminding me of the tiny crystals that linked the two murder cases.

I had to move now. The box sat between them on the counter. It didn't weigh more than a couple of pounds, but I had never moved a physical object in my present state before. I didn't even know if I could.

I stationed myself on the far side of the counter, reached over, and pushed. The box did not move. I could feel it, the cardboard walls had substance, but my pushing produced no resistance. I closed my eyes and concentrated, begging anyone and anything that might be there to help me, to give me the power to make the box move.

Nothing.

I thought of all I had failed to do in my life, all I had not even tried to do. I thought of Alissa Hayes, wandering the earth, appearing to me, asking me for my help, and of her boyfriend, who sat alone in a prison cell somewhere, having lost the woman he loved and then his life as he knew it. I thought of the young girl whose body had been dumped in the weeds and the old man who had knelt next to her, praying while his little dog waited obediently.

I was part of them. I was one of them. I was connected still, I told myself, or I would not be here. I still had a right to play my part.

The box moved. It slid over the edge of the counter and tumbled to the floor. Neatly sealed bags of evidence spilled onto the tile. And, instantly, I was overcome with a wave of pain so acute that I cannot describe it. Every fiber of my being throbbed with an agony so intense that it brought me to my knees.

I had violated the boundaries of my world. And I would pay the price.

I leaned my head against the counter, enduring the pain, telling myself that it would be worth it, as the two women dropped to their knees, frantic to preserve the evidence.

"What the ever-loving hell was that?" Maggie asked as she scooped up the bags and placed them back in the box. "Nothing broke, thank god."

"I don't know." Peggy was old, but her fingers were nimble as she plucked bags from the floor. "I didn't touch it. Did you?"

"I wasn't even close to it . . ." Maggie's voice trailed off. She leaned back on her heels and held up the small plastic bag of granules, examining the label. A bolt of exultation ran through me. Yes. "Did you get to this yet?"

Peggy shook her head. "Let me see." She held the bag up to the light and scrutinized its contents. "Sand?"

"That's your call, not mine. But I did think it was out of place. I found it near her right foot. I think it came out of a shoe, a shoe the killer probably took with him when he left. Maybe she was killed on a golf course?"

Peggy examined the bag more intently. "I see purple and black granules. This isn't sand, but it sure is something."

*Think, I willed Peggy. Think back to the Alissa Hayes case. You've seen this before, you must remember.*

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine Peggy the way she had been when she had testified at the trial. Had she held the bag of evidence in her hand? Had she been asked about the granules? I searched my imperfect memory for guidance, willing Peggy to remember, too.

"What is it?" Maggie asked, hearing something in Peggy's voice that was going unsaid and noticing the stillness of her posture.

"I don't know exactly." Peggy struggled to her feet and slid back onto her stool, removing the slide that was under her scope and labeling its contents for further study. "I think I've seen this stuff before."

"Where?"

"I don't remember. But I will. It was another case. I just need some time to remember."

I leaned against the wall, eyes closed, still throbbing with a pain that threatened the equilibrium I had grown accustomed to over the last six months. But pain could not kill me. I was already dead. And if I had done something to help, anything at all, it would be worth it in the end.

I willed Alissa Hayes to appear in my memory, trying to send the image to Peggy's mind. If I could not cross the boundaries of the physical world, I would use what power I had to affect her thoughts and guide her emotions.

A cool draft brushed my cheek. I opened my eyes. Alissa Hayes stood next to me, looking at me solemnly. I smiled at her and her mouth twitched, just a little, as if she wanted to smile back, but could not.

There was something different about her face. I tried to piece it together. Then I had it: the horrible bruises that had bloomed beneath her eyes and across her cheekbones were gone. Her skin was smooth.

Somehow, her existence in the plane we shared had been altered.

I think I was the one who had done it.

## Chapter 7



It was a long time before I could move again. It took at least an hour to recover. Alissa had disappeared and Maggie had returned to her desk by the time the pain receded. I felt heavy and listless, unable to leave my spot against the lab wall. I had no choice but to wait, praying my energy would return and wondering if I had somehow lost my ability to move about forever—then wondering what “forever” meant in my present state.

As I waited, I watched Peggy scrutinize the granules under her microscope. To pursue knowledge now seemed like a gift that I had too seldom indulged when I’d had the chance. But Peggy was a master at it. By the time I felt able to make my way down the hall, she had turned to her computer and was researching the composition of chemical compounds as intently as if they were runes and she a druid priestess determined to bring their magic to life.

I found Maggie on her hands and knees, oblivious to everything but my old unsolved case files spread before her on the floor. I didn’t know where she had stored my photo or if it meant anything to her at all. She was reading the case files with a concentration that rivaled Peggy’s. It fascinated me. All else around her felt frozen in time, nothing existed for her but the pages before her and the thoughts churning in her brain. Her eyes darted from line to line, her need to find an answer obliterating all else. This, I realized, was what set us apart from the creatures we so poorly shared the earth with: the realm of the mind.

I sat in my old chair, watching, waiting, wondering when I would have the strength to alter the physical world again—and if it was wise to attempt it at all. Was there anything I could do? I knew the files Maggie pored over would only waste her time. They were my old unsolved cases, an embarrassingly high stack of them, but, of course, the Alissa Hayes case was



not among them. Her case had been filed as solved. Maggie would never think to look in the solved archives. Not without my help.

But Peggy Calhoun—in all of her cat-eye glasses and orange-haired beauty—saved me. And though she owed me nothing, had received nothing but contempt from me when I was alive, she set the wheels in motion.

“I remembered,” she announced from the doorway. The bag of granules dangled from her fingertips.

“And?” Maggie asked, rocking back on her heels.

Peggy held the bag aloft. “Silicon carbide, with trace amounts of aluminum oxide and chromium.”

“In English?”

“Substances used in lapidary. That’s gem cutting.”

“There was an abandoned quarry near the dump site.”

“Think smaller. We’re talking much smaller rocks.”

“How is it significant?” Maggie asked.

“I’ve seen this same combination before. I know I have.”

“When?” I could feel the determination sparking off Maggie like flames.

“I can’t remember,” Peggy said. “I’ve been trying.”

“An unsolved case?” Maggie suggested, gesturing toward the scattered files. “One of Danny’s?”

Peggy shook her head. “Maybe not an unsolved case.”

I could have leapt from my hiding place and kissed her, smeared lipstick and all.

“What do you mean?”

“They had a suspect in one of their cases, a geology student or something like that. We got the guy based on traces of grains exactly like this. I didn’t testify. That was before Horace retired and I was still an assistant. He testified. But I think they got the kid. He’d still be doing time.”

Maggie frowned. “If he’s still in, how’d he kill our girl a few days ago?”

Peggy shrugged. “It may mean nothing. I can check to see how common the elements are.”

“It means something.” Maggie stroked a file as she spoke. “Everything means something. We just have to find out what.” She looked up. “Can you do a computer search of the records?”

“I tried. Computerized files only go back three years. I didn’t find anything.”

“Can you call Horace and ask him?”

Peggy looked sad. “Not anymore. He passed last year.”

He had? I had missed that, too; yet another milestone in another’s life that I had failed to notice. But, hey, I’d look on the bright side: maybe Horace was roaming around with me somewhere and I would stumble across him. I’d always liked the old geezer. He’d loved expensive cigars—and shared them freely.

“Okay, then,” Maggie said firmly. “I’ll start looking through solved cases, starting four years ago. That narrows it down a little.”

“They didn’t solve all that many cases over the last eight or so years,” Peggy reminded her. “You can easily look through them in a day.”

That stung.

“They were that bad?” Maggie sounded puzzled. She could not comprehend anyone willingly doing such a bad job.

“The bottle got them both. It happens to a lot of the guys.”

“But not the women?”

“No,” Peggy agreed. “Not the women. Women are stronger.” She smiled at Maggie and I could feel the bond between them. Born of what? I wondered. Both being women? Or was that bond a choice, something I could have had with anyone—had I only chosen to acknowledge and feed it?

“Do you think I’m being obsessive?” Maggie asked. “Am I making too big a deal out of this?”

“You got anything else to go on?” Peggy asked.

“Not really.”

“There’s your answer.” Peggy turned to go.

Maggie went to work. I found myself rooting for her the way I used to root for the New York Mets: half because I had nothing else to do, and half because I wanted to belong to something again, no matter how trivial.

Thank god Danny and I had simply thrown our case folders in increasingly chaotic file cabinets. I don’t think we’d transferred anything to Archives in the last ten years. Maggie stared at the mess, starting with four years ago, a year when an upswing in drug traffic had bloated our workload. There were stacks of drug murders we had actually solved—after figuring out that the dealers in our town were killing one another. In the end, only one suspect remained, the others eliminated by bullets. Regardless of which

of his rivals the surviving dealer had actually killed, he'd gone down for them all and would never see the light of day a free man again. I could not feel bad about that one. That conviction had been our last run at glory.

Maggie was smart. She separated out the cases involving male victims right away and set them aside. She'd look through the ones involving female victims first. After that, it took her a good twenty minutes to flip through each file, trying to decipher our notes. But she did not skip a page. At last, she reached the month when we'd caught the Alissa Hayes case.

She was inches from it, just a few files away, when Danny returned from his trip to the community college and interrupted. I could have killed him. I felt a hatred toward my old partner well in me and it surprised me. I had brought bad feelings with me to this side.

"What the hell are you doing, Gunn?" Danny asked gruffly, staring at the files stacked on the floor between their desks.

"Peggy identified a substance from the scene, elements used in gem cutting. She says it came up before. I'm looking for the connection."

"But those are *solved* case files," Danny pointed out, and I could hear something ugly growing in his voice. *Don't go there*, I thought, *please don't go there, partner*. "You think me and Fahey made some sort of mistake?" Rage engulfed him in an instant and I realized that anger was one of his few remaining emotions. His gentler feelings had long since surrendered, having lacked the power to survive against the alcohol and the self-loathing.

"I don't think anything yet," Maggie said calmly. "I'm just looking for a connection."

"Me and Fahey were thorough. You saying we put the wrong person behind bars?" His belligerence was familiar. He had stopped off at a bar before he had returned to the station.

Maggie closed the file she was reviewing. I wanted to shake Danny and scream that it didn't matter whether we had been wrong or right, that our egos were the least of it, that we didn't matter in fact, not a whit, that the only thing that mattered was for the real killer of Alissa Hayes to be caught so that no one else would die like the young girl who'd been murdered yesterday. What made Danny think our reputations were more important than that, that something as dubious as my memory could possibly matter more than bringing justice to the young girl who lay dead and unnamed in the morgue?

“Fine,” Maggie said calmly, putting the file back on her desk. She let his hostility wash over her like a wave. When his anger found no resistance, it had no choice but to recede, leaving Danny unchallenged and helpless. “What did you find out?” she asked him, all business.

“Missing Persons was a bust. We had the usual number of girls reported missing from the New York area, but they were papering everything within a couple hundred miles and none had anything to indicate they might have ended up here. But the college registrar had something. The kids have these computer cards now to scan in their attendance at classes. We found nine girls who were total no-shows at their classes over the last two days. Five were in the infirmary with some flu going around. One took off for California with her boyfriend, according to the roommate. That leaves three who might be our girl.”

“What did the roommates say? Did you show them the photo?”

Danny shrugged. I knew that shrug well. It meant he’d get to it when he got to it. “My bet is all three are shacking up for a couple of days with their boyfriends. Thought I’d get some lunch first then track down the roommates.”

“One of them is our girl.” Maggie stood abruptly and smoothed her skirt down over her knees, dismissing Danny with the gesture. “You can get a burger on the way back to the college. I’ll drive.”

“You think I need help with something as simple as that?” His tone was blatantly combative.

Maggie ignored his anger once again, robbing it of all power. “I’m going back to walk the approach to the scene. Maybe there’s something we missed in the dark. May as well carpool, right?” When she smiled, Danny stared back at her suspiciously. He could handle anger thrown at him and his fists were as ready as anyone’s to back up his words. But kindness and a backing down of ego? That was new to him. He didn’t know what to make of it. At all.

I realized how utterly sad it was that his world was so devoid of goodwill he could not recognize it when it appeared. Had I been like that, too, so ready to fight, so cut off from all but the darkest of emotions?

“Okay,” Danny agreed. “But you’re buying lunch.”

“Just don’t make it a triple burger,” she countered, but she was smiling.

For just a moment, I felt something good rise in Danny, something still alive in my old partner that responded to laughter and kindness. Then it was gone.

## Chapter 8



I had watched people eat since I died, of course, and longed for that lost pleasure, but seeing Danny eat was a whole other ball game. He wolfed, he chomped, he licked, crunched, and dripped. Watching him, it was impossible not to miss the pleasure of filling one's gut. But I think I might have been the only one who got any satisfaction from it. Danny shoveled his food in without seeming to get any joy from it at all, as if he feared someone might snatch it from him if he didn't hurry. My guess was that he was at the point in the day where he felt as if the alcohol had eaten a hole in his stomach and he had to fill it as soon as he could. I had been there myself and remembered the sensation: a weakened body, fighting back against the poison.

If Maggie noticed, she said nothing. Indeed, she never even looked at Danny at all. She drove in silence, ignoring his frantic chewing and slurping. It wasn't that she had given up on Danny, I realized. She had never considered counting on him in the first place, never weighed it for an instant. I felt ashamed at the possibility that I had once been worthy of such treatment myself. Had Danny gotten worse, or had we unknowingly shared in this sort of dismissal before? I'd had no perspective while alive, no awareness of what others thought of me, or maybe it was more like no interest in what others thought of me. In many ways, I had been dead even back then.

But there was something more to Maggie's ability to shut out Danny and, indeed, the rest of the world with preternatural concentration. She had trained herself to reject all unbidden thoughts, I decided, perhaps as protection against a painful memory. A failed marriage, perhaps. A professional failure of her own? I could feel nothing from her that might

guide me toward an answer. She kept all but the present de terminedly at bay.

When they reached the center of campus where the student dorms were located, Maggie dropped Danny off without comment. He had a mustard spot on his left shoulder as he climbed from the car and he smelled like he'd been ga toring on a barroom floor. Great. Law enforcement was about to make another good impression on young people. But what could I do?

I stayed with Maggie.

I had never seen a person act with so much single-minded purpose before. And whether it was brilliance or self-preservation, it enthralled me. I could not stay away. She radiated a brightness that drew me to her and paled all else.

She started at the parking area far down the hill, searching the sidewalks and grass in a grid pattern, her eyes never wavering as she sought evidence that might lead her closer to the identity of the girl's killer. It was almost an hour before she left the busy lower area and started up the path that led to the top of the hill. The hillside was rimmed with occasional stands of trees that slowed her even further. She took out a flashlight and scrutinized the base of each tree she passed, examined the underside of each bush, seeking a primary site for the murder but finding nothing. An hour later, she was far above the campus, in sight of the officer guarding the crime scene above. I was her shadow, searching the ground with her, mimicking a meticulousness I had rejected when alive.

We reached the crime scene, but Maggie did not stop; she had covered every inch of it already. She waved at the guard as she passed and he saluted her in return, a sign of his respect for her dedication. She followed the path upward into the forest above the field where the young woman's body had been found. As Maggie investigated a patch of trampled bushes just off the main path several hundred yards from the hilltop, our peace was abruptly shattered. I was flooded with a sense of doom so acute it felt as if the world had inverted and the very earth had moved through me in doing so. I was left with a choking, cold, all-consuming sensation that both smothered me and stripped me bare. I was stunned into inaction, frozen by an unseen source of pure evil.

Yet I saw no one there.

Maggie continued her search along the forest floor, examining broken branches and trampled leaves, oblivious to the feelings that overwhelmed me. The first wave of sensation passed, but my conviction that evil was present lingered. I sniffed the air carefully, trying to determine where the feeling was coming from. A shadow passed behind a sycamore that guarded one edge of the grove. I was there within seconds but found no one. Yet I knew the force was human, not a lingering essence, but human.

There was someone else in the grove with us.

I had seen dark shapes often since I had died; they lived just outside my peripheral vision, a tribe of distorted skulls, grasping limbs, visible only in black outlines of deformed bodies that grew, then melted into the shadows before I could fix them in my sight. But they were real, and they were of my netherworld. That much I knew.

This was different. This was a man.

The evil passed behind me now, manifesting as an icy draft on the back of my neck. A foul, decaying smell filled my being. I turned around in a circle, slowly, hyper-vigilant of all I saw.

I saw no one.

But I knew that he could see her. And he would remember her face.

Maggie was bent over the roots of a tree, examining nicks in its gnarled surfaces, pushing aside leaves with her hands, unaware that she was not alone. I waited, completely still, suddenly certain that a fourth presence had joined us, this one less human than the other.

I was confused by the signals that assaulted me. Smell, noise, touch, empathy. My hearing had grown acute over the past few months and I imagined I could hear a rapid heartbeat nearby—or maybe I really could hear it. Or was it my own remembered pulse? No, it was real. It was someone's heartbeat, someone very much a human. I detected a light snick-snick, no more than a whisper: feet creeping over dry leaves. A corporeal presence. Very human. And very much a danger to Maggie.

A human who remained hidden, watching Maggie and waiting.

But waiting for what?

Maggie knelt near the base of a large oak tree and ran her fingers over the bark. She took a penknife from her pocket and pried an infinitesimal bit of matter from under a groove in the gnarled surface, bagging it carefully. She backed away from the tree with deliberate steps and walked slowly in a



circle around it, her eyes never leaving the trunk, her vision focused about three feet off the ground. She did not disturb the carpet of leaves pushed up against the base of the tree, but tiptoed carefully outside of its range.

As she moved behind the trunk, I saw him at last: a man, hiding behind a nearby tree. I could not see his face in the shadows, but I could tell that he was tall. Tall and very, very still.

Before I could react, before I could so much as move an inch, the man made a sound as if he were choking. He took off through the trees, pushing through bushes and fallen branches in his panic, without regard for the noise he was making, or for Maggie, who drew her gun the instant she heard him and took off in pursuit, her courage rising without hesitation.

I followed, wondering how I could be of help, but stopped abruptly when I saw Alissa Hayes standing in the spot where the man had waited. Her face was sad, but her eyes glittered with something close to triumph. She looked at me. Our eyes held. Contact. I understood: *the man had seen her*. I realized it in an instant. The man waiting to hurt Maggie had seen Alissa Hayes. That was why he had taken off running. He had seen her and the sight of her had terrified him. Because he had known her. And known that she was dead.

Who was he? I followed Maggie through the trees, but I was too late. She was hurrying back down the hill, gun holstered, talking into her cell phone.

"I lost him," she said to someone on the other end. "He just disappeared on me. It was weird." She listened for a moment. "I don't know. It could have been a curious student who panicked." She was silent. "No, I'm sure of it. There's rope marks and poly threading caught in the bark. With signs of a struggle beneath. I think he kept her there for a while." She listened intently. "Just send the whole crew. We can't afford to miss anything. I'm thinking this guy likes his work." She paused and frowned. "Sure, I'll call him. He's here somewhere on campus, tracking the victim. No, I understand. It's not a problem."

Maggie hung up and slowed as she reached the trees where she had discovered the signs of a disturbance. She did not enter the grove again and I felt a sense of relief. She stood in the sunlight instead, head tilted up to catch its rays, its warmth an antidote to what she had imagined among the dark shadows. After a moment, rebalanced, she called Danny on her cell phone and told him what she had found. He came huffing and puffing up

the hill fifteen minutes later, his shirt soaked with the sweat of an alcoholic forced into physical exercise.

"I found where he kept her," Maggie said as she held up an open palm, warning him to stop at the edge of the grove. "Or at least one of the spots. Bag-and-tag is on its way."

"One of the spots?" Danny asked.

"There's not a lot of blood." Maggie frowned. "We're missing something."

"Well, I IDed her," Danny replied, as if that settled the whole matter and they could now all go home to bed. He flipped open his notebook. "The dead girl is a junior named Victoria Meeks. Roommate hasn't seen her since before the weekend. Thought she was away with a new boyfriend. I showed her a photo from the scene and the roommate is certain. It's her."

"Victoria?" Maggie asked. And then she did a curious thing: she searched the sky, her eyes tracing the contours of each cloud as if they held an answer for her. "Victoria Meeks."

"Roommate called her Vicky. She's local. Mother lives in town." Danny stowed his notebook away. "So she was killed here?"

"She wasn't killed here. Just held here." Maggie sounded certain.

"Why?" Danny asked, looking around. "There's a quarry right over that hill with a million hidden spots. He could easily have tortured her and dumped the body over there. We'd never have found it."

Maggie's voice was soft as she nodded toward the grove. "It's beautiful in there, that's why. It's almost like a church. The light filters through the leaves like stained glass. And farther up the hill, you can see for miles." She looked at Danny. "I think he just thought it was a beautiful spot for what he had in mind."

Danny looked perplexed. He stared at the trees, his brain working out the pieces. Alissa Hayes emerged from the shadows right in front of him, her pale body barely visible in the bright sunlight. She passed through the living, unseen by them both, though Maggie cocked her head and stared at the air between them. She had sensed something, I knew, but not enough.

Danny was, as always, oblivious. He looked right through Alissa Hayes, still not seeing her, still not understanding that he had failed her—and that I had helped him fail.

## Chapter 9



“Her mother’s listed as next of kin,” Danny explained as Maggie directed the forensic team to the site in the grove. “She lives pretty close to here. I can run over and let her know.”

Yeah, and stop at a bar on the way. I knew Danny.

Maggie blinked as she took in Danny’s rumpled appearance, the mustard stain on his shoulder, the odor of alcohol and sweat that clung to him. “I’ll do this, Danny.”

“You sure?” he asked. “ ’Cause it can be tough duty.”

“I’ve done it before.” She hesitated. “Is the mother a widow?”

“Looks like it. No father was listed on her papers.”

“Then I need to do it. Consider it women’s work.”

“Suit yourself.” Danny yawned. “This hot sun makes me sleepy.”

Maggie left Danny in the parking lot of the station house, scratching his armpits in the warmth of the winter afternoon, yawning without apology, the dead girl named Victoria Meeks and her mother already forgotten.

I stayed in the backseat of Maggie’s car, ashamed for Danny—and even more ashamed of myself for having played a part in what he had become.

Maggie did not notify the girl’s mother alone. Instead, she made a phone call, then detoured to a shabby apartment complex filled with old people. Danny and I used to call it D. B. Heights, because so many dead bodies were reported from there each year, frequently bloated to unrecognizable form by how long they had lain, dead and unnoticed, on a bathroom or living room floor. I’d harbored a fear that I might end up there myself one day had Connie ever made good on her vow to throw me out of the house if I kept drinking. I guess that was one fear that death had erased.

Today, the complex looked like Shangri-la. Indeed, anywhere would have been paradise with a sun so bright in the sky, clouds so pure, air so clean. It was the best of winter, a gift to the living. Yet here I was, the dead, enjoying

it more than anyone. It was enough to make me feel alive. That had been happening to me more and more over the last month. I had come to notice the beauty of the physical world, the times when it left behind human misery and struck out on its own to prove that this was still a generous planet, one that was far too bountiful and forgiving for the likes of human beings.

Maggie stopped at a neatly maintained duplex near the entrance. It was painted slate gray and rimmed with beds of winter foliage that bloomed with a hardiness that mystified me. After a moment, the door opened and Morty, the beat cop I had disparaged for so many years because of his apparent lack of ambition and his willingness to walk the same neighborhood his entire career, came down the steps wearing his full dress uniform, right down to a pristine shine on his shoes. He was dignity personified. His white hair gleamed against the deep blue of his hat. He looked more like a chief than a street cop.

He knew Maggie well. "Hello, Rosy," he said as he climbed inside her car. "Need me again, do you?"

Maggie's smile was sad. "I think she may have been all this lady had. I couldn't bear to go it alone."

Morty touched the brim of his hat. "That's what I'm here for. You break the news; I know you see it as your job, but you can leave the rest to me."

"I bet you thought this part of your job was over once Dad retired," Maggie said as she headed out for the bypass that encircled our town.

Morty shook his head. "This is one part of my job I know will never be over. At least not until it's me they're notifying someone about."

"You have a family?" Maggie asked, a little startled, as if it had never occurred to her.

"A brother out in California. He has a family of his own. I haven't seen him in years. Not quite sure why. Seems like every passing day pulls us further apart."

"It happens that way sometimes," Maggie admitted, as if she were thinking of the people in her own life who had drifted away from her for no real reason.

"It does."

They rode in an easy silence I envied, having never reached that point of comfort with anyone, not even my wife. I was always getting berated for

something, or apologizing for a transgression, and there had been no time for this sort of peace. But I had slithered out of facing my failings with the skill of a jackal, so how could I blame those who had disgorged their disappointment on me when they had me pinned down?

The mother of the dead girl lived in a two-story clap-board house that was too large for a person living alone. She had been unable to leave after her daughter left for college, I guessed, perhaps unwilling to abandon the memories that the house held. Oh, but she would likely leave after today. This would not be a memory to cherish.

As I trailed Maggie and Morty up the long walkway, I knew I was about to witness the tipping point in another human being's life, that very moment at which they gave up on living and decided to wait it out until the end. To lose a child could not be easy; it was not the way of the world. Had I been paying attention in the past, I might have absorbed the magnitude of it before. Certainly I had delivered this kind of news to parents more than once. But all those notifications of next of kin, delivered according to some script Danny and I had been given in the academy a good twenty years before, had blurred into a single uncomfortable sense of aversion and left little impression on my soul.

This one would be different. I would be seeing the destruction of a human heart, the loss of all of its hopes and endearments, from a place close to inside that heart. I resolved to see it, to remember it, to learn from it. I would make up for what I had missed the first time around.

The enormity of the suffering that awaited slowed me down. I hung back, gathering my courage, as Maggie knocked on the door. A trim, middle-aged woman answered. The welcoming look on her face collapsed into disbelief and uncensored anguish as Maggie delivered the news. Morty caught the woman on her way down and led her to a nearby sofa. There, the mother aged before my eyes. I saw the flow of blood leave her complexion, the brightness in her eyes deaden to gray, the lines of her face harden and deepen in permanent sorrow. The air around her solidified, as if the universe itself was trying to embrace her, trying to remind her that she, at least, was still among the living. She sank against the cushions of her couch, speechless, as Maggie filled the room with words, giving the woman time to compose herself and to absorb the enormity of what she had lost.

Morty sat next to the mother, holding her hand, waiting his turn to serve. The woman closed her eyes, unable to face the world that had betrayed her, and Maggie waited until she had opened them again before she offered to answer any questions she might have.

The woman asked how her daughter had died.

The news that her child had been murdered hit the mother with the force of a blow. She jerked back and Morty put his arms around her, holding her tight, as if infusing her with his strength. She began to weep, her tears flowing like liquid silver from her eyes until she buried her face in her hands and sat, face hidden, absorbing the details of her daughter's demise with a determination that shone through her sorrow as a testament to human endurance. It was the worst possible news a mother could hear and yet she was forcing herself to face the truth. I was awestruck at her courage.

Maggie sat on a footstool at the mother's feet, speaking slowly and clearly, assuring her in a dozen different ways that whoever had done this to her daughter would be brought to justice. The light I had glimpsed in Maggie the first time I had seen her returned, surrounding her, making me wonder if my Maggie—for I thought of her as mine by now—was more than human, might even be an avenging angel sent down from the heavens to repair the unholy violence humans visited upon one another.

Or did we all have that light within us, that brightness and strength?

No, I told myself. Not everyone. It was Maggie. Maggie was special.

When the mother asked if they were sure it was her Vicky, Maggie was ready. She had known the question was coming, had known that the mother would be unable to risk hoping for a reprieve. She gently showed her the photo Danny had shown around campus. The hopelessness in the mother's eyes told them all they needed to know: the dead girl was absolutely Victoria Meeks, only child of a loving mother who would now need to face the worst alone.

Then Morty worked his magic. I saw that he was not the passive oaf Danny and I had labeled him. He was, indeed, a gentle man whose heart ached for those who hurt around him. In the kindest of voices, he asked the mother to tell him about her daughter, saying it would help them find her killer if they all knew more about her.

I understood that this was not why he had asked.

He was asking because he knew that the broken woman before him needed to talk about what she had lost, would want to honor her daughter's brief life—and that talking would help her reconcile the awful truth of the present with the lingering light of her dead girl's past. Perhaps, in talking, she would realize that though her daughter was gone, the memories of her remained and could never be taken from her—the kindest gift the human mind has to give its host.

At first the mother answered Morty's questions in a faltering voice. Eventually, her voice grew stronger. She began to tell them about all her remarkable daughter had accomplished, despite having lost her father at an early age.

The mother paused abruptly and I knew she was thinking of her long-dead husband, wondering, with the endless optimism of the human race, whether he might not be waiting somewhere for their daughter, a loving presence that would usher her to a better place than this world.

I wondered, too. There had been no one there for me. And no one able to give testimony to my memory, not the way this loving mother had. No one had grieved for me like this, in fact, yet I had no one to blame but myself.

Morty seemed to know that the mother was thinking of her dead husband, was envisioning a reunion between her loved ones. He patted her hand as if to reassure her that this was almost certainly true. The mother wiped her eyes and asked if Morty would like to see photos of her daughter's life.

"Oh, yes," he agreed at once. "I would. Let me get them for you."

Soon the mother had stacks of albums piled before her on the coffee table and was poring over them with a rapt Morty beside her. He listened quietly as she sketched a portrait of her daughter. Unnoticed, Maggie found the kitchen and made them all tea while the woman led Morty through page after page of her daughter's life.

Maggie listened intently as the mother talked, sorting out all that the woman said in some part of her amazing mind, searching for a clue to the girl's killer. That was what made her different from Morty, I realized, and more dangerous to the killer. Morty was listening with his heart, Maggie with the total sensory acuteness of a hunter seeking prey. Yet, she had known this about herself—had known her sympathy would quickly give way to the desire for vengeance—and so she'd had the good sense to bring Morty with her to provide the gentleness she lacked.

That, I thought, made her a very dangerous opponent to whoever had taken the lives of Victoria Meeks and Alissa Hayes. Maggie knew her weaknesses and she had learned how to use them. I was filled with an inexplicable pride that she had taken on the task of bringing the dead justice and would not rest until it was done. Maggie would do what I had not done.

After a while, Maggie murmured her regrets, promised to send a squad car later, and left the mother sitting with Morty, taking comfort in the remembered glory of the mundane milestones humans mark their brief lives with. Birth, baptism, school, confirmation, holidays, graduations, the senior prom. Morty was ready to listen to it all. Morty was ready to bear witness.

I followed Maggie, knowing that whatever good still lurked within me, it was not in my heart, but in my head. I could help Maggie. Morty, well, he was a master at what he did best. He needed no help from me.

We left Morty and the mother sitting together on the sofa, yet another photo album spread out across their knees, the mother intent on remembering her daughter while Morty, resplendent in his dress uniform, listened with an unwavering interest, his entire being devoted to the stranger beside him.

I was alone with Maggie, content to search her face for signs of what her magnificent mind was mulling over. She seemed distracted, upset by something. I could not fathom her thoughts.

And then I felt it again. Like an icy finger from the grave reaching through the warmth of the car to trace a fingernail down my spine: cold, cultivated, celebrated, coddled evil. And it was near.

I looked around, searching the curb, the driveways, the houses. I saw no one. No one at all.

Maggie reached the corner where the subdivision began and turned right toward the station house. As she turned, I looked behind us and saw a gleaming metallic black SUV pull out from the curb to follow us. It was soon lost in the traffic behind us, mired in a sea of trucks and impatient rush-hour motorists who lost their manners and, frustrated, created mayhem in the process. All Maggie had to do was activate the dash lights—which she did not hesitate to do—and, unwittingly, she left the SUV far behind us as the traffic parted to let us pass.

But I had seen the SUV. And I had felt it. The man from the grove was following Maggie. It would not take him long to find out who she was.



## Chapter 10



Maggie had left the living for a date with the dead. The body of Vicky Meeks was waiting for her. The medical examiner was already well into the autopsy and Maggie did not interrupt. After a brief nod, she stood out of his way and watched him work. He was a thin, silent man who exuded calmness even when his hands were buried in a body cavity.

He and I had something in common, I realized. We knew what others did not: that the bag of skin before him, holding a stew of decomposing tissue and percolating chemicals, was no longer Vicky Meeks. She was long gone, and the body left behind was nothing more than a symbol for her mother to mourn over.

The medical examiner's detachment intrigued me. I concentrated on him, trying to feel what he was going through as he weighed out parcels of tissue on the scale and reduced Vicky Meeks to a series of precise scientific notations. Up in the forensics lab, three stories above us, Peggy Calhoun had chosen a microscopic world as her battlefield, but the medical examiner had chosen a world within as his. He was its warrior and his concentration absolute. To him, Vicky Meeks was a puzzle in reverse, a conundrum of flesh and bone to be filleted, separated, laid bare, and labeled in his search for the reasons why this body had given up as her vessel.

It did not take him long to catalog the causes of death. He announced them to Maggie quietly as he worked. Vicky Meeks had been killed slowly, bit by bit. She had been battered, bound, tortured with sanguinary zeal, and finally, strangled when her killer grew disenchanted with the reality of games that could never measure up to his fantasies.

Washing her body clean of grass and grime had revealed more of the small groupings of parallel slits carved into her legs and torso. Alissa Hayes had borne the same strange cuts, although some of hers had been much

older than others and a few people had suggested she'd done it to herself—until they were discovered on the backs of her thighs, where no one could have achieved such symmetry solo. Vicky Meeks had similar cuts in almost the exact same places, although hers looked freshly inflicted, the wounds as red and raw as bite marks.

With unwavering silence Maggie watched the body reveal its secrets. She was not like the medical examiner, I realized. To her, the flesh and bones before her were still sacred. Yet I could tell she had shelved almost all personal emotions, that she was focusing on what the body could tell her with such intensity that she was close to sharing in the obsession the wounds revealed.

When the examiner explained that the girl had been held for at least a day, bound by her hands and feet, Maggie touched the rope burns tenderly, her eyes half closed, as if she hoped to divine the source of the torturer's madness. It was the same thing she had done at the crime scene—held her palms to the earth where the body had lain, as if she could feel knowledge through it.

The medical examiner was in the middle of cataloging a constellation of shoulder wounds when Danny bumped in the door, a sterile gown thrown haphazardly over his clothes. He reeked of booze and sweat.

I was astonished. What had inspired him to attend the autopsy? Was he trying to rise to Maggie's level of competence? Or did he have a more malignant reason for being there?

I could not feel much from Danny. A dullness clung to him, as if he were giving up life layer by layer.

I wondered if Danny was dying.

"Well, look who the wildcat drug in," the medical examiner said, his eyebrows rising in surprise.

I'd never known he had a sense of humor.

Danny glared at him but said nothing.

Maggie treated Danny with respect, as if his doing his job was no more than what she had expected. She summarized the examiner's findings in a clear voice, perfect in her recall. As she began explaining the nature of the symmetrical knife cuts, Danny could no longer pretend he did not recognize the pattern. He flushed and I could feel his heart palpitating as if it were my own. His hands began to tremble so violently the medical examiner noticed.

“You okay?” he asked with concern.

“Alissa Hayes,” Danny whispered.

“Who?” Maggie asked, her gaze so intense it broke through Danny’s confusion.

“Alissa Hayes,” he said. “About four years ago, maybe less. Fahey and I caught the case.”

“What about the Alissa Hayes case?” Maggie asked slowly.

“She had these same marks. The parallel cuts that look like gills.”

“Are we talking about a closed case?” Maggie said. “As in the ones I was going through earlier when you stopped me?”

Danny was sweating so profusely I almost felt sorry for him. “It was closed,” he mumbled. “We got a guy for it.”

“Someone is serving time for it?” Maggie asked. I could feel her indignation rising. “Someone got convicted?” She looked straight into Danny’s eyes. “Was it a clean conviction?”

That was her way of asking Danny if he had tampered with the evidence.

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Maggie glanced at the medical examiner, but he just shrugged. “Before my time,” he explained.

“Let’s take a look at the file,” Maggie suggested. “This could be a copycat.”

“Maybe so,” Danny said, turning away from the body. “Maybe so.”

We all knew it wasn’t true. Danny had what was left of his conscience to tell him that he’d been sloppy, that one of his mistakes had come back to him.

Me? I had Alissa Hayes herself to tell me the exact same thing.

## Chapter 11



It took Maggie less than fifteen minutes to find what she needed to know from the file on Alissa Hayes: it had been a bad arrest. Not corrupt, no evidence was planted—that I knew of—but sloppy and rushed, which may have been worse from her standpoint. She was angry at first, and then curious, and then angry again, her eyes narrowing at each step in the tainted trail that took an innocent man from freedom to imprisonment.

Danny did not wait around for her judgment. He disappeared in search of a bar that would help him forget what was likely to come: headlines, at least locally, and maybe even nationally, all about an innocent man being sent to jail while a murderer roamed free, followed by dissections of the case and where we had gone wrong. Soon after, my photo would be dredged up and my shooting death rehashed yet again. Cop shot dead while his partner stood by, killing the assailant only after it was too late. It would all be replayed endlessly in the press and on television, and soon a defense attorney somewhere would demand to go through our other solved cases, searching for even more mistakes. I'm sure there were plenty to find. And though no one would say it aloud, every person we had ever worked with would share a single thought: our failure to find the right killer had led to another young girl's death, and who knew how many other undiscovered kills? The blood of Vicky Meeks was on our hands. Danny would become the Lady Macbeth of our world, wandering through the final stages of his career, unable to wash away the stain.

Yet I thought of it all with complete detachment. What did it matter now? My wife would not be surprised to learn I'd been sloppy. And if she decided to comment, there was nothing, however disparaging to my memory, that she did not have a right to say. I had failed her as miserably as I had failed

Alissa Hayes and Vicky Meeks. If it gave her comfort to defend me, so be it. If she needed to condemn me—then so be it, too.

Judgment belonged to the living. All that mattered to me was making it right. All that mattered was that I stay with Maggie and help her find the real killer. Maggie, my angel. My terrible, beautiful, avenging angel. My Maggie.

She could have gone a lot of places once she finished reading the file. She could have headed upstairs to see our commander, even the chief of police. She could have stopped by to see the district attorney and set the wheels of a new investigation in motion, requesting the beginnings of the paperwork avalanche that would be required to free Bobby Daniels, the man doing time for the Alissa Hayes murder.

But what she chose to do astonished me in both its simplicity and in its humanity: she chose to give an innocent man hope.

I did not know where we were going at first. Nor did I care. It was a joy for me to sit beside her in the passenger seat, breathing in her citrus scent, rejoicing in her closeness as she drove through our town's streets.

It was not a physical attraction. I had left such things behind, which was only fitting for a man who had so misunderstood lust when he was alive, never bestowing it on the woman who loved him, wasting it instead on drunken wrestling matches in mildew-scented motel rooms, disjointed trysts that never brought satisfaction and were only attempted as a way to assign purpose to mutual drunkenness. I was beyond such things now, capable at last of a purer love and filled with unshakable devotion to the object of that love.

Maggie hummed when she was alone. It was the sound of her brain working, I decided, the engine hum of a mind that never stopped seeing, analyzing, concluding, seeking the truth. I listened to the sound, I treasured her nearness, until, within minutes, we had left the last outpost of town, the Double Deuce Bar, behind us and were headed out on a country road toward the county line.

That was when I knew the magnificence of Maggie's heart.

That was when I knew we were going to prison.

## Chapter 12



Like all prisons, the structure was immense and forbidding: bricks stretched upward toward an irrelevant sky, the expanse of claustrophobic walls interrupted only by narrow windows that resembled suspicious eyes looking out at an unwelcoming world. Three separate barbed wire-topped metal fences surrounded the prison, creating a barrier no man could hope to penetrate. A worn exercise area near a side door curved in a red quarter moon, hugging the prison walls, its clay surface tramped into barrenness by thousands of feet over thousands of days filled with millions of moments of despair. The courtyard was deserted and even the corner guard towers looked desolate, though I knew steel-eyed men lurked in their shadows, rifles in hand, ready and willing—maybe even eager—to kill. This was a maximum-security facility. It held the worst of the worst. It took hard men to guard them.

The day had grown cold and the sky had turned gray. It was a fitting mood for the oppressive journey that lay ahead. But Maggie was not one to contemplate the unhappiness of the world within those brick walls. She hopped from the car determined to emerge unscathed from the joyless atmosphere that awaited her. She strode toward the front gate with a brisk competence, leaving little need for the guard to request her badge number, though he did, recording it carefully in a computer before checking it against her physical badge and photo ID. It was not a familiar process for me as I had cared too little about my cases to follow up behind these distasteful walls and, god knows, few district attorneys had wanted anything to do with either me or Danny once one of our cases had passed into their hands.

I followed on Maggie's heels, indulging in bursts of nervous immaturity made possible by my invisibility to the living. I made faces at the guards,

stuck my hands through bars that had no power over me, walked back and forth through the bulletproof glass barriers, goose-stepping like Charlie Chaplin. I could not help it. This was a place of confinement and yet here I was, enjoying the ultimate of freedoms, freedom from the constraints of the physical world.

As Maggie progressed through a series of guard points, I grew bolder. I touched the guns of the guards and danced in front of the security cameras. I was a nine-year-old boy in an abandoned candy store, left alone to indulge my desires.

But every scrap of my enthusiasm evaporated in a single, sobering moment when the last of the metal entry gates clanged shut behind us and we stepped into a world of hopelessness; of brooding, evil influences; of hatred made tangible; of lost souls and despair; of the blackest, most base impulses our species can harbor in the most secret recesses of our hearts and minds. It was all there in a world that was relentlessly lit and yet choking with darkness, a world where the air smelled triumphantly of cruelty overpowering kindness and of the strong cannibalizing the weak.

There was no Hell, I realized at that moment. Because there was no need for a Hell. We built our own hells, we dotted our world with them, we enclosed them and manned them and fed their residents with hatred and peopled them with bodies as dead to life as those moldering under the ground. We made our own hells and then we forced others to live in them.

Nothing could be as bad as this, I thought, as I felt all joy hoarded within me shrivel and shrink from the evil surrounding me.

But I was wrong.

The prison was noisy with the shoutings and murmurings of men, yet underneath the cacophony of voices, I could detect an undercurrent of endless agony, the echoes of unuttered screams and the residual taste of eternal hopelessness. Though I could not see them, I knew lost souls lingered here among the living, men whose lives had been claimed within these walls, rendering them into vengeance-filled spirits unable to move on, beings who clung either to their murderers or to their confinements, bound by hate to a world where all goodness had withered, exulting in the only power they now had left—the power to torment the living.

This was where I had sent an innocent man.

My hands trembled as I followed Maggie down the tiled floor between rows of cells. The catcalls started at once. Men shouted lewd suggestions, grabbed at their crotches, and pumped their hips, running their tongues over their lips.

I was ashamed for all men.

Maggie ignored it all. The light that surrounded her, seen only to me, did not waver. It was as if she was protected by a cocoon of grace that allowed her to move through their dark world unscathed, unaffected by their ugliness.

I followed in her footsteps, cowed by the forces around me, afraid I might run into evil spirits with the power, somehow, to harm me. I had not yet felt fear for myself in this existence, yet it now filled me like a poison—until, as I walked down that long corridor, I realized that the noise that greeted Maggie at each cell died as abruptly as it began, the men silenced almost immediately by some unseen force even as the next cell in line began their catcalls. Then I began to notice the faces of some of the men as they rushed to the bars of their cells, staring, mouths open, yet silent, their eyes disbelieving, their bodies exuding the acrid odor of fear.

*They were seeing me.* And they knew I was not of their world.

They could see me.

Yet not one of them said a word.

Not every man had this power. But those that could see me were frightened and it was that thought that calmed me. I did not need to be afraid of them. They were afraid of me. I began to move closer to their cells, enjoying the way they would back mutely to the far wall of their enclosures, looking around to see if anyone else had noticed their cowardice, ashamed to say anything aloud.

Yes, I thought: see me and fear me. For I shall visit the righteous terrors of unspoken worlds upon you if you sully the uncorrupted splendor of the woman who walks before me.

But why was it that some prisoners could see me and others could not? Did it have to do with their crimes? Did killing open up a terrifying window into the world of the dead—was that the punishment the universe visited upon its murderers? Or was it simply that the profane atmosphere within the prison walls and the lack of distraction had fine-tuned their senses, much like a blind man who develops hearing beyond the acute? Had their solitude



caused some of them to see what they might otherwise only have felt in passing?

*Or was it because I was one of them*, a dark prince who could only emerge from nothingness when the time came to parade down the halls of hate? Had they recognized me as one of their own? Perhaps the devil did not wait until death to claim his followers. Maybe prison was just an anteroom to Hell, a holding pen where few escaped and where many waited, weighing their mortality and their inevitable demise against the far more terrifying prospect of anagogic immortality?

At last we passed through a final guard point and into the interview area, a maximum-security room rimmed with picture windows—though we were in the very heart of the prison, with only unspeakable views to speak of. Guards were stationed outside the room, along each wall, looking in. Bobby Daniels, once Alissa Hayes's boyfriend, and later labeled her murderer, waited for Maggie inside the room. His hands were spread wide against the metal tabletop, his body unnaturally immobile. He'd gained a lot of muscle over the last three years. Indeed, he had bulked up massively and his shoulders strained against his prison jump-suit. His face had grown larger, too, somehow, all traces of the boy he had been banished beneath an emotionless veneer. Only his sandy hair, still worn short, and his fussy gold-rimmed glasses seemed to belong to the same man I had sent away.

The guards had not manacled him hand and foot, though I thought it was protocol. And that told me Bobby Daniels was a model prisoner, that he had given no one grief since entering here over three years before.

He looked up as Maggie entered the room, but his blank face did not so much as twitch. He had hardened beyond comprehension, his humanity replaced by a granitelike facade that had one purpose and one purpose only: to endure.

I tried to penetrate his thoughts, as I could do with others, to uncover his essential life moment. But his mind was strong, and while I could sense a light within it, he had surrounded his memories with layers of impenetrable blankness. I concentrated harder until an image of a young woman came to mind. She was dressed in jeans, a waterproof jacket, and hiking boots, her body framed by sunshine that obscured her surroundings. I could hear the sounds of rushing water. I concentrated harder still until a clearer image emerged: the woman was standing on top of a boulder before a waterfall,

her head thrown back as she stared up at the torrents that poured forth behind her. Then she turned her head and looked back over her shoulder, her smile joyous and inviting.

It was Alissa, Alissa gloriously alive, and with Bobby still, if only in the core of his deepest memories.

She had kept him alive in here.

I circled the room, unseen and free to wander, running my hands over the walls, making faces at the watching guards through the glass, sniffing the corners like a dog, searching for traces of what had gone before. But Bobby's presence had banished all evidence of prior human occupation. He carried a curious stillness about him, and while he gave off no light, he also gave off no darkness. It was as if he had been granted a poor man's state of grace, a form of spiritual suspended animation. He was neither here nor there. But he was, it felt, somehow inured against the darkness that flowed around him, by some sort of neutral, protective strength. Granted by what? His innocence? God? The universe? Was there really a source of goodness out there somewhere, something with the power to protect a man like Bobby Daniels, a lamb sent to slaughter in a den of hungry wolves?

Maggie showed him her badge. His eyes flickered. "I thought you were my new lawyer," he said in a voice creaky from disuse. "I filed another appeal."

"On grounds of inadequate representation?" Maggie guessed.

"Yeah," he said, looking her up and down as she arranged herself across the table from him. He was still human : I felt his interest in her form, his silent acknowledgment that she was a woman and that it had been a long time since he'd been in the presence of one. But it was a detached, almost clinical interest. He was too self-contained to allow such base emotions their freedom.

"You read my file?" he asked her.

Maggie nodded. "You have grounds. There were a lot of things your lawyer could have done and didn't."

He ignored her comment, asking instead, "Why are you here?"

Maggie stared, trying to gauge him. I could feel her failing to penetrate the wall he had raised around him. I felt her explore sympathy, then falter and change course, opting for directness instead.

“I’m here because there’s been another murder and I’m certain whoever did it also killed Alissa Hayes,” she said. “I’m here because I think you’re innocent and I have enough proof to free you almost immediately. I’m here to tell you that I will do everything I can to see that your new lawyer gets this information this afternoon.”

He stared at her, mouth agape. It was as if he were a stone wall transmuting into clay and cracking into ten million pieces before my eyes. His resolute exterior crumbled, his shoulders slumped, his muscles trembled—then he covered his face with his hands and he wept.

He cried without explanation and without apology. He cried from the bottom of his soul, from the core of his heart, with all of his body and all of his might. He cried without stopping for over five minutes, washing away three years of hatred, of fear, of loneliness, of overwhelming despair.

Maggie waited, holding the guards off with a hand signal. The guards looked on with a mixture of astonishment and awe, each wondering what Maggie could have said so quickly to break a man they believed to be immutable.

Maggie did not try to stop him from crying. She waited, her compassion a peculiar, practical sort I had never experienced before. She was making a list, I realized, while Bobby Daniels cleansed himself of the past, she was making a list of all the things she needed to do to see that the man before her was freed. Freed before something terrible could happen to him first in that unexplained and all-too-heartless way of fate. She did not want to lose him now to some murderous impulse by a jealous inmate, or let him be blackmailed into committing crimes on the outside by lifers who knew he had family and how to get to them. She was covering every eventuality and cataloging what it would take to get Bobby Daniels back safely to those who loved him.

By the time Bobby Daniels had used up his reservoir of tears, she was ready. Maggie touched his hands lightly and he withdrew from her touch. Then, almost apologetically, he slid his hands back across the table toward her, as if offering her his trust, as rusty as it was, as hard as it was for him to feel anything again.

“I’m going to ask them to put you into solitary confinement until you are released,” she said quietly. “Don’t take it as punishment. You understand

why? You should avoid all contact with other prisoners from this moment on.”

He nodded, still shaking from the shock, I thought, until I realized that he was not so much shaking as realigning his entire sense of being. Hard emotions close to the surface receded and others, long buried, rose to take their place: hope, gratitude, relief, and more. He became a new man before my eyes and I realized, with awe, that Maggie had been the instrument of his resurrection.

“Can you answer a few questions for me?” she asked him softly. “Things that should have been asked of you the first time around?”

By me, I thought, questions that should have been asked by me. Maggie was cleaning up after my failures.

“Of course.” Bobby Daniels sat up straighter. “Ask me anything.”

“How did you meet Alissa?”

“At her house. Her father was my faculty advisor and I went over one night to drop off an application to grad school I wanted him to look over. She was there. Her father wasn’t. He was still on his way home from teaching a late class, so she and I got to talking while I waited. We really hit it off. She was different. I liked her right away.”

“Different how?” Maggie asked him.

“Alissa was very straightforward, yet delicate, too. She was unadorned and honest. Not at all like the other girls I went to college with. And maybe a little shy. I had to ask her three times before she’d go out with me and, even then, we had to keep it secret from her parents. She said they’d disapprove if they found out, even though she was nineteen and in her second year of college.”

“She was still living at home?” Maggie asked, eliminating a dorm as a possible link between Alissa and the new victim, Vicky Meeks.

Daniels nodded. “Her father’s a big-deal professor and they live in this huge house right by campus. I’d have lived at home, too, if I could have slept in an extra hour each day and had someone to cook and clean for me.”

“Her mother did that for her?”

“Her stepmother. Her mother died when she was pretty young, like eleven or twelve. Her little sister was even younger, just a baby.”

“You ever share any classes with Alissa?”

He shook his head.

“Did she make jewelry?” Maggie asked.

“Jewelry?” Daniels sounded surprised. “She didn’t wear jewelry, much less make it.”

“Okay,” Maggie said. “Right now, we’re comparing her class schedule with the new victim’s schedule to see if there’s any overlap. You can help.”

“Overlap?” Bobby hesitated. “Is the . . . was the girl you just found the same age as Alissa when she died?”

“Just about,” Maggie told him.

“Then any overlap wouldn’t be with friends or classmates, right? I mean, Alissa was killed four years ago. Any overlap would have to be—”

“People who worked at the college,” Maggie finished for him. “Or maybe someone who lives or works near the college. Can you help?”

Bobby was silent, thinking back to what must have seemed like a lifetime ago to him by now.

“Did Alissa ever monitor any classes not on her official schedule?” Maggie prompted him. “Or hang out on campus somewhere a lot, belong to any clubs we might not know about, maybe had a favorite coffee shop?”

Daniels shook his head. “She wasn’t a joiner. It was really just . . . me and her. We had this private world when we were together and it was enough for both of us.” He was silent, gathering his strength. “When I lost her, our world was gone. I went to this dark and terrible place instead. And then it felt like I never got out of it once I ended up in here.” His voice had fallen to a whisper and his eyes dropped to his hands. They were shaking.

Maggie barely touched his arm, afraid to intrude on his so carefully protected space. “You won’t have to be here much longer,” she promised.

He put his head back down on the table and began to cry again, hiding his face, afraid of the hope that flooded through him.

“Do you want me to call your parents?” she asked quietly.

He nodded. “They moved to Kansas City three years ago,” he mumbled. “To get away from the phone calls and stuff. People can be . . . very cruel.”

“I’ll find them. Is your new lawyer on record yet?”

“Yes. Her last name is Esposito. I can’t think of her first name right now.”

“I’ll see she gets the information this afternoon,” Maggie promised.

He cracked again, overwhelmed by emotions. He put his head down and Maggie patted the top of his head gently.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “You made it through. It’s over now. I promise you, it’s over.”

He could not answer her, or thank her, though I don’t think Maggie needed that anyway. She patted him on the shoulder and rose to go, gesturing to one of the guards to let her out of the room.

“What the hell did you say to him?” a guard asked. “Did his folks pass on?”

Maggie shook her head. “No, but can you keep him here for another hour? I want to talk to the warden. He’ll see me. He’s an old friend of my father’s.”

The guard stared at her, then his hand touched the brim of his hat. “Sure. We can keep him here awhile. Why?”

Maggie did not answer him; who knew what might happen, how Bobby Daniels’s good fortune might spread through the prison population, leaving him prey to the spiritual vultures, the blackened souls whose only pleasure left was to rob all others of happiness? “Can you take me to the warden’s office now?” she asked instead. “It’s important.”

The guard conferred with his coworkers, then led her back down the same hallway we had taken to the interview room. Curiously, as we passed between the cells of imprisoned men, most remained silent this time. They shrank back from Maggie’s passing as if aware that she, somehow, wielded a power they could neither comprehend nor ever hope to triumph over.

She was just human, I knew that, though she gave off more light than most. But to me, at that moment, she was once again an avenging angel, a seraph of such immense might that at any moment great argent wings might spring forth from her shoulder blades, unfolding in a flash of light so intense that the very walls of the prison would crack asunder, banishing the dark to the darkness and sending the righteous upward on beams of glory.

An angel. My angel.

The men who lived in this bleak world also sensed this power in her. They cowered in the corners of their cells, ashamed of themselves with rare self-awareness, afraid of something they did not understand. Those who saw me behind her cast me glances of fear before their eyes slid to gaze upon Maggie, then looked away again.

I knew then, beyond all certainty, that though there was evil in the world, and far, far too much of it, it did not have the power of the light we held

within ourselves. Which meant that I had a chance, that I had a future—and that Maggie had given more than one man hope that day.

## Chapter 13



I could not shake what I had felt within the prison—to realize that in each of us there incubated both a portal to Hell and a window to Heaven frightened me. For I now suspected that my death had saved me from being claimed by evil, inch by inch, excuse by excuse, one miserable day after another.

I left Maggie and returned to my family, drawn to them by a need I did not quite understand. Though I had been steadily disengaging myself from them, and though I had seen Connie's future and not begrudged her new life, I found that I now needed to know, with absolute certainty, that my sons did not harbor some dark spot deep within them that might one day bloom into the malignant core I had sensed deep inside many of the inmates I'd passed.

I was beginning to fear that we were all were born with that potential darkness but that, thankfully, it withered and died in the light of the love we received from others. I thought, too, that perhaps a speck of that darkness had survived inside me, had been fed by bitterness, alcohol, and self-loathing until it had gained hold in my final decade, feeding itself on my anger and disappointments, growing ever larger until the day, mercifully, that I died.

Had I loved my boys enough to vanquish that nascent spitefulness forever? No, I had not. But maybe Connie had.

I waited just inside the kitchen, listening to the sounds of conversation and laughter in the dining room next door, admiring the feeling of safety that Connie's kitchen exuded. Dinner was almost over and their talk was relaxed and meandering, fueled by the presence of the man I had seen with Connie earlier. He asked my boys simple questions, then gave them room to answer, not interrupting, or giving advice, simply listening and asking more



questions when they were done. Under this gentle probing, my boys opened up and I learned more about them than I had ever known when I was alive. Sean did well in math, not so well in vocabulary, and wanted to be a shortstop rather than an outfielder. Michael was going to be in the school play, in a leading role yet, and was not the least bit embarrassed by it.

I felt a deep gratitude toward this man who had stepped forward to love my sons and a relief that they could turn to him for guidance.

Dinner over, the boys jostled through the kitchen door together, all elbows and shoving, each trying to be the first to claim dessert. Sean, my youngest, won the battle, his smaller size giving him the advantage as he ducked around a corner while holding his larger brother at bay. He reached the refrigerator first and used the door of it to block Michael from gaining access. The largest bowl of pudding firmly in one hand and a can of whipped cream in the other, he cast his brother a triumphant smirk—and I was filled with a sudden, overwhelming love for these still unformed young men. They were so innocent in their vendettas. I prayed the world would be kind to them both.

“So, are you banging that Courtney chick yet?” Sean asked Michael, failing miserably in his attempt to sound older.

“Shut up,” Michael said immediately, pushing his brother aside as he reached for his share of dessert. “Say something like that about her again and I’ll shove your face in the toilet.”

Sean froze, surprised by his brother’s fury. Michael looked just as shocked.

“Sorry, man,” Sean mumbled.

And then I think it hit us all simultaneously—Michael truly liked the girl Sean was teasing him about. I could tell he was both confused and pleased at this realization, and that Sean was envious, but respectful, of his brother.

As for me, I felt elation: my oldest son was approaching love, and approaching it willingly. I would not need to worry about him. Nor about my youngest, either. He loved his brother and I saw it plainly then. That I had shared in this moment elated me. I was connected to my sons in a way I had never achieved while alive. And yet, even as I felt the love that bound us, I knew I had to let them go. They were going to be all right. It was time to let them all go.

“What did I miss? Besides the whipped cream?” Connie’s voice cut through the silence and the boys looked up, faces wreathed in smiles. She saw their delight. “What’s going on?” she asked.

They were silent.

“Okay,” she said slowly, “perhaps you can answer this: would either one of you like to go out to a movie? Cal says it’s on him.”

They stared at one another, unsure of how to handle this sudden turn of events: a movie, on a school night, in the middle of winter?

“With popcorn and Cokes?” asked Sean suspiciously.

“And Raisinets?” his brother added. Michael always pushed his luck.

“Why not?” Connie said. “In for a penny, in for a pound.”

The boys glanced at one another and the signal was given. They slurped down their pudding like starving wolves, racing to be the first to finish, horrifying their mother but amusing the man named Cal, who had joined them in the kitchen to be a part of their laughter.

“I guess they said yes,” he said good-naturedly as the boys tossed their empty bowls into the sink then raced to the back porch for their jackets.

“I guess so,” Connie agreed. “I’ll be right out.” She gave him a long kiss before he followed my boys out the door, though she’d see him in less than a minute.

I was happy for her.

But Connie lingered behind in the suddenly quiet kitchen, her eyes focused on a small photo taped to the refrigerator door. It was a snapshot of me, taken long ago, when my hair was full and my face still unlined. As I stared at the man I used to be, I noticed the calendar beneath my photo, with the day’s date circled. I realized why Connie needed to lose herself in a movie on this day of all days: today would have been our twenty-second wedding anniversary.

I was not completely forgotten after all.

## Chapter 14



Maggie wasted no time after visiting the prison. I found her on the top floor of headquarters, presenting her case to Commander Gonzales while Danny seethed at her side. She explained that there were detailed similarities between the Alissa Hayes case and the murder of Vicky Meeks, and said she was there to ask that Bobby Daniels be released and the Hayes case reopened.

I could tell the commander was appalled at what he was hearing—and that my old partner was starting to get his back up in that self-righteous way of drunks. I prayed he would not go there, though I knew my hopes were futile. Danny always went there.

I had not seen the commander since my death. I was curious to know what sort of man he'd seem to be now that I could pick up on so much more than I had been able to while alive. Gonzales had always intrigued me. We'd been in the academy together, but by the end of our first decade on the force, he had lapped me several times since, by anyone's reckoning, zooming up through the ranks like a god among mortals. He was a smooth operator, adept at the ass kissing required for a career in the administrative ranks. He was also a favorite of newscasters seeking sound bites since he was the picture of confident good looks—trim, with immaculate taste in clothing and a dignified demeanor. And he was Hispanic to boot, which was always good for one angle or another.

But was he as together inside, in the places where no one could see?

As I concentrated on him, Gonzales gave off absolutely nothing. No anger, no curiosity, not even concern. Of course: he was, above all, a politician, skilled at being what others wanted him to be. I expected nothing, so Gonzales gave me nothing back. He was a mirror reflecting blankness. It was fascinating.

The discussion soon deteriorated into an argument, thanks to Danny. “Fahey and I worked our asses off on that case,” he said, interrupting Maggie’s presentation. “We went by the book and I stand by our conclusions.”

Maggie was disgusted at Danny’s opposition. She had made the mistake of thinking his earlier acquiescence meant he would not oppose her attempt to reopen the Alissa Hayes case. Clearly, she was not experienced in the erratic ways of drunks. But I knew better. Danny was capable of overlooking the most monumental factors, then taking a stance on the most mundane of details once you were inches from the finish line.

“Give me the tie-ins,” Gonzales demanded, ignoring Danny completely. I knew that was a bad sign. But Danny was too far gone to notice.

“Me and Fahey did a damn good job on that case,” he insisted.

Gonzales stared at him coolly. “You and Fahey never did a damn good job on any case,” he said flatly.

Danny had the good sense to shut up.

Maggie was ready. She buried Danny under a mountain of irrefutable logic that tied the two cases together: the identical bruising, the ligature marks, the neat sets of parallel knife cuts ritualistically inflicted, their physical similarity, the lapidary dust found at both crime scenes, the fact that they’d been students at the same college, plus a dozen other similarities she had discovered since comparing the two cases more closely.

None of her information elicited an emotional response from Gonzales. It was not until the end that I felt a flicker of involvement from him, and when it came, it was based on pure self-interest.

“We have no leads in the Vicky Meeks murder,” Maggie explained. “None whatsoever. None of her friends can give us the slightest clue as to her private life. And there were no personal objects found at the dump site this time—”

“Which means the murders may not be related,” Danny interrupted.

Both Gonzales and Maggie ignored him.

“The Meeks investigation is a closed door,” Maggie told Gonzales. “All we really have to go on is what happened to Alissa Hayes. Her file has a dozen unexamined leads that might bring us to the killer of them both.”

Gonzales, still thinking it over, gazed at Maggie.

“Sir, if we don’t catch this guy soon,” Maggie said, “he’ll kill again. Vicky Meeks had wounds that indicated a sense of urgency missing in the Alissa Hayes case. I think he’s killed in between these two and his compulsion is getting worse. We just haven’t found all of his victims.”

“According to you, Clarice,” Danny mumbled.

“Shut up, Bonaventura,” Gonzales snapped. “If you didn’t have less than a year to go before retirement, I’d have kicked you to the curb long ago.”

Maggie pretended not to hear. I felt a flash of gratitude toward her on behalf of my old partner.

“Reopen the Hayes case,” Gonzales instructed Maggie. “You’ll be the lead. I’ll call the DA and let him know what we’re doing.”

“That scumbag Daniels will be out in three days,” Danny complained.

“He’ll be out by tonight if I have anything to do with it,” Gonzales said. I knew then that he’d been convinced the second Maggie opened her mouth that Danny and I had screwed up royally. He’d been working out a recovery plan the entire time Maggie talked: Danny and I would take the fall, Maggie would be positioned as the heroine in the press—and he would be able to cover his ass.

“You’re out, too, by the way,” Gonzales added, glancing at Danny.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Danny asked.

“It means you’re on desk duty indefinitely. And let me have your firearms while you’re at it.”

“What?” Danny reached reflexively for his piece.

Maggie’s hand inched toward her Glock.

“Give me both your firearms, Bonaventura,” Gonzales said more loudly.

“Why?” Danny asked. “Nothing’s been proven. I want my union rep.”

“I’m asking for your firearms because, for the fifth day in a row, you reek of alcohol,” Gonzales explained. “And I don’t want you screwing up any more cases. If you want to argue, fine. But I can have a Breathalyzer administered to you in three minutes flat.” He reached for the phone.

Maggie had melted from the room the instant she sensed what direction the conversation was going in. But I could feel her presence lingering outside in the hallway as she listened quietly.

“So this is what it’s come to,” Danny grumbled as he handed his regulation piece and backup to Gonzales.

Gonzales took the guns without comment and put them in a bottom drawer.

"I guess we're a long way out of the academy," Danny said. "So much for the brotherhood." He never had known when to quit.

Gonzales shoved the drawer shut so hard his entire desk rattled. He looked up at Danny with a loathing even I shrank from. His tone was deadly. "I'm going to tell you this once, Bonaventura, and once only. I swore I would never say this to you, but here it goes: you're done. You're finished. You're over. You will sit out the rest of your career behind a desk. You will be grateful to me for it."

"For screwing up one case?" Danny asked bitterly.

The commander leaned over the desk until his face was only inches away from Danny's. "I read the file on your partner's murder four times," Gonzales whispered. "I read every paragraph on every page. And I don't ever want to hear another word from you about 'the brotherhood' or, so help me god, I will bring you down for dereliction of duty and gross negligence contributing to your partner's death. At the very least."

Danny turned white as Gonzales picked up paperwork and began to read. So far as he was concerned, Danny was as dead as I was.

After a moment, Danny walked silently from the room, leaving me to wonder what in god's name Gonzales had meant.

## Chapter 15



Maggie wasted no time once she got the go-ahead to reopen the Alissa Hayes murder case. She started by trying to find the family. But the Hayes family had moved from their listed address, perhaps hoping to escape the publicity that had surrounded Alissa's death four years ago. After an hour of fruitless searching on her own, Maggie contacted a vice provost of the college and asked for the faculty records to be opened. Alissa's father had been a fairly recent hire at the time of his daughter's death. He was now head of the Geology Department and, it turned out, living in a campus-owned home normally reserved for visiting professors. It was a good ten miles from campus.

I wondered if one reason Alissa Hayes roamed the realm of the living was simply because she was trying to find out where her loved ones had gone.

But I was wrong: as Maggie rang the front doorbell of the Hayes home that evening, I spotted Alissa waiting behind a tree in the front yard, staring at her family's new house. I moved closer, hoping to communicate with her, but her attention was focused on the front door. I understood why when a young girl of eleven or twelve opened the door at Maggie's knock. Her beauty stunned me. She was tall and gangly, yet somehow graceful in that coltish way of young girls whose bodies have gotten away from them. Her skin was as pale as paper, almost translucent, her gray eyes luminous, and her honey-colored hair fell in liquid waves to her shoulders. Yet, an immense sadness radiated from her.

Why would such a child have cause to be sad, even accounting for her sister's death four years before? She was the epitome of all that is glorious about the human species, at an age still unsullied by experience, still protected by the boundless optimism of childhood.

“You must be Sarah,” Maggie said. I searched my memories for the child who had been about eight years old when her older sister died. I barely remembered her, only that she had been chubby back then. And frightened. I had not paid her much attention. She had turned into a swan.

But why did Alissa stay in the side yard, peering at the front door? When Maggie stepped inside, I followed her, curious to know what kept Alissa at bay.

The house was as brightly lit as a laboratory and sterile in its orderliness. Bare white walls stretched bare for yards, unbroken by paintings or other decorations. The furniture was minimalist and almost uniformly covered with unobtrusive gray cloth. The floors were bare wood. Only the windows had been adorned, the outside world banished by heavy curtains the color of blood.

Alissa’s sister led Maggie into the living room and left her there. Maggie sat on the edge of the couch and waited for the parents to arrive. The mother came first, rounding the corner with a vibrant presence that belied the strange aura she gave out. She was a plump woman, with pale blonde hair worn high on her head in an elaborate twist. She wore layers of loose, colorful clothing. Brightly hued rocks glittered at the base of her throat and around each wrist, stones that she touched reverently, but unconsciously, as if they were talismans. She stood out against the austerity of the living room like a gaudily plumed bird, and yet, she carried a thick cloak of dark memories about her, a past that exuded suffering of a magnitude I had only glimpsed during my lifetime. There had been deep hunger in her life, great fear, even abject terror, the loss of love, desperation, intense hatred, and so much more. Whoever she was now, however safe her current life, she had experienced great deprivation in the past and could not leave the bleak memories behind. Though she surely was trying to forget. Perhaps that was why everything about her seemed to be too much: excessive makeup, mounds of hair, flashy clothing, even overeating.

“Mrs. Hayes?” Maggie asked, rising to greet her.

“Yes,” the woman said briskly, ignoring Maggie’s outstretched hand. “I am Elena Hayes.” She had a Russian accent. I examined her more closely and realized that she had been quite beautiful at one time, though layers of fat now obscured her once-delicate features.



"I've come to ask you some questions about your daughter Alissa," Maggie explained, displaying her badge.

"She was not my daughter," Elena Hayes said quickly. I felt fear flicker in her as she examined Maggie's badge, a residual fear of authority rising unbidden to the surface, a reflex from the past she could not control. "I was Alissa's stepmother. Her real mother died almost a decade ago."

"Of course," Maggie said. "My apologies. I knew that. Is your husband here?"

"My husband does not like visitors," the woman answered. "And especially about a tragedy like this. Why do you come now? We have tried hard to put this behind us and it has not been easy."

"I understand," Maggie said. "But I do need to speak to your husband." She sat back down on the couch with such finality that Elena Hayes did not argue.

"Wait here," she said and swept from the room in a flurry of flowing fabric and vibrant colors.

I stayed with Maggie, trying to understand the emotions that the Hayes home brought out in me. The forces in the house confused me. There was such sadness, but acute fear, too. Was it the remnants of Alissa's violent death, clinging to those she had loved, or were her stepmother's painful memories so powerful they infused the entire house?

Her father perplexed me even more. I had not interviewed him when Alissa died. The family had been Danny's responsibility. This was my first glimpse of Alan Hayes up close. I was surprised at how polished he seemed. He was in his early fifties, in perfect shape, with black hair that was meticulously cut and peppered with just enough gray to make him seem dignified. He was handsome by anyone's standards, with graceful, almost feminine, features. But his expression was mournful and his dark eyes distrusting.

I could tell he was fiercely guarding his emotions, that Maggie's presence made him uncomfortable, and that he disliked the disruption of the relentless order of his home. He was tall with long hands that he waved languidly in the air when he talked—the hands of a pianist more than a geologist. His fingernails looked manicured. His clothing surprised me, too. Though he had worn a suit to court, sitting far from me, among Alissa's family and friends, I had expected him to be wearing blue jeans and a

flannel shirt at home. Instead, he looked like a banker. It was early evening, a time when I would have long since changed into sweatpants and had a beer in my hand, but he wore neatly pressed gray slacks, a light blue shirt, and a tie.

Perhaps that was why he had risen so quickly through his department's ranks to become its head. He looked the part. Or perhaps sympathy for his great loss had played a role in his rapid ascension. Certainly, he carried his tragedy with him. It radiated from him almost proudly, defiantly.

All I could really tell was that Alan Hayes was not a happy man. He had a clipped way of talking that made it difficult to determine inflection. His words were bitten off so quickly it was difficult to follow his speech and I suddenly wondered if he had been promoted in part to spare his students the effort of absorbing his lectures.

Maggie picked up on my thoughts. "Do you still teach?" she asked him abruptly, though she had yet to explain why she was there.

"One class," he answered, just as abruptly, sitting as far from Maggie as he could. He placed his hands precisely on his knees. "What's this about?"

When Maggie explained that his daughter's murder case had been reopened, little about him reacted. A muscle below his right eye twitched, fluttering briefly before it grew still. Then I picked up on his rapid heartbeat—it raced violently for a few seconds until it slowed abruptly to a more even pace again.

Was he that much in control of himself? I wondered. Had he done that? Who had that much power over their body?

"I don't understand," he said stiffly. "Why has it been reopened?"

"Another student has been murdered," Maggie explained. "And there are irrefutable similarities between the two cases."

"I see." His fingers fluttered against his knees then grew still.

"Don't you want to know who she was?" Maggie asked, staring at him impassively. I knew better: she was absorbing his every movement, every sound he made, even picking up on many of the unseen forces I could feel radiating from him. She did not like him, and I wasn't sure why, but I could understand her feelings. Alan Hayes was a cold man, despite his surface perfection.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

“The new girl who was murdered. Don’t you want to know who she was?”

“Oh.” He looked perplexed. “She was a student at our college?”

“Yes,” Maggie held up a photo of Vicky Meeks that her mother had provided. It had been taken a few months before her death. She looked radiant in a flowered summer dress, delicate and filled with life.

Alan Hayes stared at the photo. I wondered if he was thinking of his own lost daughter.

“Did you know her?” Maggie asked.

“She doesn’t look like a geology student,” Hayes said. “She seems so delicate. Like . . .” His voice faltered.

“Like Alissa was,” Maggie said quietly. “Like your other daughter is now.”

He nodded.

“Her name was Vicky Meeks. She was a sophomore.”

He nodded again. “That would be why I did not know her. I only accept seniors in my class. It’s honors level.”

“Can you tell me anything about her?” Maggie asked.

“No, I’m sorry.” Hayes gazed at her with his mournful eyes. “I wish I could help.”

He suddenly seemed so alone and helpless sitting there, an oversized man in an undersized chair, vulnerable and exposed, overcome by the memories of what had happened to his daughter. But as he sat there, I realized how curious it was that he was facing Maggie alone. Where was his wife? His other daughter? Why had they disappeared at this difficult time for him? Why were they not there to lend him emotional support?

For the first time, I wondered: was the fear I felt lingering in this house somehow fear of him?

Surely not. He was perfect in both appearance and manners, hardly the stuff of nightmares.

And yet, something about him and his home was off-kilter. I could feel it closing in on me, despite the gracious facade, a jumble of conflicting emotions so strong they swirled through the house like winds that might coalesce and turn into a hurricane at any moment. The longer we were there, the more I felt it. Something in this house was off. And much was hidden.

Could Maggie feel it, too?

If she did, she did not show it. She began to question Hayes about his daughter's death almost four years before, leading him through the events up to her disappearance a week before her body was found. She followed up on details and asked questions that neither Danny nor I had even considered.

Alan Hayes had a remarkable memory and he shared what he remembered with her in precise, almost finicky detail. But not once, I realized, did he seem to be emotionally involved in what had happened to his daughter. He had pulled a force field of detachment around him, masking what he felt inside.

Protection—or a weapon? Or was he on medication? I could not tell.

Maggie did not try to penetrate his aloofness. “Thank you,” she said after extracting a few more meager bits of information. “I would like to speak to her sister now,” she asked.

“That is impossible,” Alan Hayes said firmly. “She remembers nothing that would be of help. She was too young when Alissa died. I cannot allow you to reopen old wounds.”

It was the longest speech he had made all night.

“You’re her guardian,” Maggie said without rancor. “That’s your call.” She rose from the couch to go. “I should let you know that Bobby Daniels will likely be released from prison soon. His lawyer will file for release as soon as possible and the district attorney does not intend to fight the motion.”

His reaction was instantaneous and overwhelming. The news that Bobby Daniels would be freed enraged Alan Hayes. “You are freeing Bobby Daniels?” he asked, his voice cracking with anger. Silent waves of hostility radiated from him with a palpable force even Maggie could feel. She took a step away from Hayes as he jumped to his feet and clenched his fists. He fought to regain control, but failed. His face blazed with hatred. “You’re freeing him after what he did to Alissa?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hayes,” Maggie said quickly. “But the evidence is overwhelming. He did not kill your daughter.”

“After what he did to my child?” Hayes asked through clenched teeth. “After the way he defiled her, he walks free?” His arms started to tremble

with the effort of maintaining control. I felt a sudden fear for Maggie's safety.

"I'll have someone call you when we know more," she said quickly, moving toward the door. "I'm sorry, but we will find her real killer. I promise you that."

"Her real killer?" Hayes asked contemptuously. "Bobby Daniels destroyed my daughter. That's all I need to know."

"Thank you for your time," Maggie said. "I'll let myself out." She hurried into the hallway, glancing around to see if the wife or daughter had overheard. She had nearly reached the front door when it flew open, slamming into the wall behind it with a crack that sounded like a pistol shot. Maggie drew her gun automatically as Danny barreled into the house, arms flailing as he tried to shed the grasp of two plainclothesmen being towed along in his wake.

"What are you doing here?" Maggie asked, horrified. She holstered her gun and exchanged a glance with her backup: they were all in for some trouble.

Danny ignored her question. "Mr. Hayes," he called out. "I apologize for the intrusion tonight. I've explained this is an unacceptable way to handle the situation. I'd like to talk to you about . . ." Danny's thoughts failed him and his words trailed off as he realized what he had done. He stood, blinking, in the hallway, looking almost surprised that he had gained entry.

Alan Hayes materialized in the doorway just in time to see Danny befuddled and stranded. His relentless control had been restored. His eyes flickered over Danny, noting the disheveled clothing and florid face, then lingered on Maggie. "Is this your partner, Detective Gunn?" he asked quietly. "Am I to understand you are not here with authorization?"

"You are to understand that he is not here with authorization," Maggie spat back, the first sign of temper I'd seen in her. "Get him out of here," she ordered the plainclothesmen. "Take him back to the station and get him some coffee."

Danny started to protest, but Maggie stopped him with a single word. "Gonzales," she said distinctly.

Danny let himself be led out the front door. It had taken all of his alcoholic indignation to gain entry and he'd not thought far enough ahead to

know what to do once he reached there. His confusion made him suddenly docile.

Alan Hayes looked amused. "It would appear your department is not exactly united in your belief that Bobby Daniels is innocent, Detective Gunn. Personally, I found Detectives Bonaventura and Fahey to be exemplary in their investigation into the case."

"I bet you did," Maggie said coldly. She glanced up the stairs to the second floor, sensing they were being watched. I felt her withdraw from her own anger, unwilling to let the younger girl see it. "And I can assure you of this, Mr. Hayes: every move the two original detectives made, every fact they uncovered, every step they took, every lead they pursued and the dozen they ignored will be retraced and verified and investigated anew. So, please, by all means"—she smiled at him beatifically—"sleep well tonight, rest assured that we will indeed find out what happened to your daughter. Even if we are a few years late."

She walked out the door without bothering to see his reaction and Alan Hayes was alone with his fury. It filled the room and grew, feeding on its power, expanding until I was certain it pervaded the entire house.

"Good night, Miss Gunn," he finally called after her, his clipped voice sounding oddly polite, almost as if he were mocking her. "Thank you for stopping by."

Suddenly, I had to leave that house. It agitated me every bit as much as the atmosphere inside the prison had. Indeed, I realized, though this was a home, it felt very much like the prison. The anger now filling it had cleared away the confusion that clouded my initial reaction to it. I now felt despair beneath the fury, as well as suffering, hopelessness, and hatred so powerful it shocked me. I could not endure it any longer.

I hurried after Maggie, anxious to leave what I felt behind.

Alissa Hayes would not let me go.

She stood immobile on the front sidewalk, blocking my way, a silent specter whose pale face glowed under the front porch light. I stopped on the top step and stared down at her.

She held up both hands and pushed them out toward me, beseeching me to go back.

I shook my head. I was afraid.

Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. She looked frightened. "Please," she begged me silently, placing the tips of her fingers over her heart then extending them to me in supplication. She stared up at a light that burned in the window of a second-story room, her face filled with sorrow. I followed her gaze and saw the silhouette of a young girl outlined in the window as she looked out into the night, watching Maggie leave.

Alissa looked at me, wordlessly pleading, and I knew what I had to do. If Alissa Hayes could not bear to enter the house where her family lived, I would do it for her. I owed her that much.

I made my way up the stairs, past the closed door of a bedroom where I heard Elena Hayes inside, weeping beneath the angry murmur of her husband scolding her for letting Maggie in. I moved past the open door of an empty bedroom and made my way down the hall to the room where Sarah Hayes slept.

She was still standing at the window, looking out into the darkness, unaware that her sister was staring back at her from the yard, consumed with an identical sorrow and longing.

The young girl's utter sadness filled me, too, unbidden. I wanted to weep for her. She was yearning for something, but I could not tell what. Her older sister back? Freedom from this house? For the years to pass quickly, so she could escape it all?

The angry voices down the hall grew louder. Sarah turned away from the window, dully, as if she was about to embark on a distasteful routine she had endured many times before.

She shut her bedroom door and locked it against the sound. Then she locked it again. And again. She had three locks on the inside of her bedroom door. Even so, she placed a chair under the doorknob as well, jamming it so the door could not be opened. Then she sat on the edge of her bed, hands trapped between her knees, shivering, though the room was warm. She stared at the door, waiting and waiting.

For what, I thought, for what?

Below me, outside the window, Alissa Hayes wept beneath the branches of a tree, her figure a ghostly apparition of anguish, a soul caught between worlds in a quagmire of sorrow she could not escape.

Even her sobs were silent. I was her only hope. And I had no idea how to help her. Except to stay where I was, waiting with her sister, waiting to find

out the truth.

And then I saw something that gave me hope. It rose in me like an ember flaring among the ashes: I saw Maggie beneath a streetlight, leaning against the hood of her car, staring up at the windows of the Hayes house, watching the shadows that danced behind the blinds, drinking in the muted sounds of Alan Hayes's rage, taking in every scrap of information she could.

*Yes, Maggie, I thought. Do not be like I was. Do not turn away. The answer lies within this family.* And as I thought it, I knew it was true. The truth was here, in this unhappy house, and it would take both Maggie and me to see that Alissa Hayes got justice.

I played my part. I waited in the corner of a young girl's bedroom fortress, keeping watch while she slept, unknowing of all but her dreams, not even twitching in sleep when, deep into the night, her doorknob rattled, paused, then turned slowly in the dark, and finding no way open, grew still again as footsteps faded down the hallway.

I stared at the face of Sarah Hayes in sleep, drinking in her beauty, the innocence of her repose, and I was filled with a fierce longing to protect her and to protect her innocence.

I waited through the night, knowing I was not alone, not while Maggie watched with me. Together, we would find a way.



## Chapter 16



I am disconnected from earthly pleasures in my present state. I do not need to eat or sleep. So it was that I waited quietly in a corner of a young girl's bedroom, my mind on other things, while Sarah Hayes slept the night away, then rose and dressed for school. I could move easily from place to place, unseen, and my role as a detective had exploded in possibilities. I had spent the night pondering my options. When morning came, I chose to stay with Sarah. I wanted to understand what fed her fears, to know the secrets in her life and how it all led back to her dead sister. There were pieces missing and I wanted to find them for Maggie.

Sarah was a lonely girl. She ate breakfast alone, in complete silence, without even a cat to share the quiet of the kitchen. Her parents did not appear to send her out the door, nor did she exude any sort of desire to see them. She went about her morning ritual with a mechanical efficiency that made my heart ache—to be so young, and yet so without enthusiasm for what life had to offer. She had been robbed of joy at an early age.

I followed her onto the school bus, unseen by the boisterous crowd. I sat in the back, next to a skinny boy who smelled of curry and never took his eyes off his handheld video game. Sarah sat a few rows in front of me, beside a chubby girl with braces and frizzy hair. They did not say a single word to one another. Sarah ignored the chaos around her—the flying pieces of paper, the insults, the laughter and shrieks of outrage—and instead opened a small paperback she carried in a pouch of her knapsack, reading with an intensity that took her far from the world around her.

She was used to her solitude, I realized, and quite comfortable with it. Perhaps she even preferred it.

It seemed sad in one so young.

I followed her through the halls of her junior high school, where she walked alone unheralded by others—but not entirely unnoticed. The boys recognized her emerging beauty. They cast sidelong glances at her as she passed by, afraid to comment, yet captivated by her unconscious grace.

I wondered what that beauty would do to her desire for solitude. The world would not leave her alone for long.

The other girls gave her a wide berth, some resentfully, as if they had decided that Sarah was a snob who did not want to associate with them. But others avoided her out of a vague fear I could feel entwined with all the other confusing emotions these adolescents carried inside them: she was the girl whose mother had died, the girl whose sister had died. She must be cursed. Which meant that if you got too close to her, perhaps it would happen to you.

As she moved through the minutes of her morning, going from classroom to classroom, I sensed a gradual relaxing in her, a blooming of her spirit. Though she remained silent, never offering an answer in class, she seemed content. I realized she had found a refuge in the ammonia-scented halls of this brick-and-linoleum palace, however shabby a palace it might be. Her remarkable strength touched me. I marveled at the power of human beings to adapt and endure, to keep going in the face of fear, and to somehow find a corner of the world where they felt safe.

I could not share in her peace. After a while, the jostling, erratic energy of her schoolmates began to wear on me. So many adolescents gathered together seemed to trigger a chemical reaction in their basic physiological makeup. Impulses sparked and danced from them without rhyme or reason, as if they were little more than sacks of ions dancing off one another, or flaying wires intermittently jolted with electrical current. The bombardment of so much uncontrolled energy annoyed me. Walking through the halls was like being set upon by a cloud of mosquitoes. I was amused that I could still feel such an emotion. I felt human again, if only for a moment, but after a while I began to crave peace. I was glad when the morning passed and lunchtime arrived.

Sarah's solitary existence continued, even in the middle of the noisy cafeteria. She sat alone at a table in a far corner of the vast room, hidden by a pillar from the hopeful eyes of the boys. An austere lunch sat untouched before her while she buried her nose in a book.

It seemed a lonely life for such a young girl, walking and eating alone among so many people who could have been her friends. I was relieved when, a few minutes before the bell, another girl approached Sarah's table. She was a few years older than Sarah and every bit as breathtaking. Her deep brown hair was straight and cut well below her shoulders. It shimmered each time she turned her head. Her skin was perfect, smooth and unblemished, and still lightly browned from the summer sun. She was tall and slender, and carried herself with a confidence usually found in older women. She towered over Sarah as she stopped by the table to say hello.

She smiled at Sarah, revealing perfect teeth. "How's it going?" she asked in an unexpectedly alto voice. "Did you find someone to lend you the notes?"

Sara smiled back. "Jeanie let me look hers over. I think I did okay. You missed the bus this morning."

The other girl nodded. "Overslept again. My dad was pissed when he heard."

"You shouldn't have told him," Sarah said. "He'd have never known."

"They called him," the girl explained. "Too many tar-dies in one month." She hesitated. "But you know how it is. They cut you slack."

"You played the dead mother card?" Sarah asked, laughing.

"It ought to be good for something."

Sarah's eyes seemed suddenly to focus on some place far away. "Yeah, it ought to be," she agreed. Their eyes met. "You going home on the bus today?"

The other girl nodded.

"See you then," Sarah said.

"Sure. I'll save you a seat." The girl walked gracefully away, her hair swaying with each step, another beautiful young woman left without a mother, another young life left without a real home to call home.

At least Sarah was not alone.

## Chapter 17



There are advantages to being dead. Finding a seat on the school bus is one of them. Eavesdropping on two young girls is another.

As I sat down in the seat behind Sarah and her friend, I ignored a drowsy kid with long hair who smelled like patch ouli on one side of me and a twitchy fat kid who smelled of pizza on the other. I could easily hear as the two girls exchanged small talk about schoolwork and teachers. They offered statements up to one another shyly at first, as if unsure whether the other would find their concerns too mundane. Yet each girl was respectful, almost tender, toward the other. The older girl, who seemed to be around sixteen or seventeen, was especially thoughtful of Sarah's shyness. She drew Sarah out with questions about books, established common ground with their shared disdain for the rows of goofy boys sitting in front of them—every one of them hopelessly unmanned by these two beauties. Then she made Sarah laugh with a pointed comment about a teacher. That laugh startled me. I had never heard Sarah laugh before then. At last, though, the older girl uttered the sentence she'd been leading up to and I understood the bond between them even more.

"My dad is taking her to Bermuda for the weekend and he's letting me stay by myself so I don't pitch a fit."

"The blonde lawyer?" Sarah asked. Her face crinkled with distaste. "Didn't you say she was about twelve?"

The other girl nodded. "Practically. Way younger than him. I think maybe twenty-eight or twenty-nine. He thinks it makes him look younger or something but he just looks even older and more pathetic next to her."

Ah, men, I thought wryly. How we deluded ourselves. We believed we were in control, when the truth was that any teenage girl could sign, seal, and deliver our egos to us on a platter with a single, truthful insight.

“What are you going to do?” Sarah asked her friend. A cloud passed over her face when she asked the question. Bad memories.

“What do you mean?”

“It sounds like your dad is getting serious with her.”

The other girl sat quietly. “Nothing,” she finally said.

“Nothing?” Sarah asked.

The other girl shrugged. “What can I do? If he wants to marry her, he will. And don’t think she’s not trying to get him to ask. Last week, she didn’t return three of his phone calls, that I know about, and he was going crazy. But there’s not much I can do. I leave for school next year anyway.”

“But your mother’s only been dead a year,” Sarah said. “How can he?”

The other girl shrugged again. “He’s not meant to be alone.” She nodded her head wisely. “Not many men are, you know. They get lonelier than we do. She’s not the ideal stepmother, but at least she treats me like a sister and doesn’t try to be my mom. Plus, she’s my size and has some pretty cool clothes and she’s always trying to buy my love.” The girl held out her arm and jangled her bracelet. “Check these out. They’re real.”

“Really?” Sarah bent over the gemstones. “Those are nice.”

Her friend nodded. “Nothing but real diamonds and real gold for Taylor.” Her voice sounded too old for someone so young. When had our children stopped being children?

“At least—” Sarah started to say, then stopped abruptly.

“At least what?” the other girl asked.

“At least you have a great dad,” Sarah said quietly. “A really great dad, and cool grandparents, and a thousand cousins and uncles and aunts.”

Her friend nodded. “And I bet every single one of them is going to hate Taylor.” The girls burst out laughing and every male head on the bus turned to watch. I can’t say I blamed them. It was the sound of sirens luring men to their death on rocky seas.

“I’ll invite you to the wedding,” the other girl told Sarah. “Want to be a bridesmaid? I could guilt her into it.”

Sarah shook her head. “No way. I’m opposed to step-mothers on principle.”

“I bet you are,” the other girl said as she rose from her seat. “It’s us.”

“Already?” Sarah asked and I understood then that their minutes on the bus together might be all she had when it came to human contact that

brought her pleasure without expectations or danger in return.

“I know. It never takes long when you’re here.” The girl smiled at Sarah as I followed them down the aisle. They ignored the stares of the boys and the sudden quiet that fell upon their classmates as they passed by. There was something about Sarah’s friend that caused their insults and lewd suggestions to die on their tongues. Her dignity made them feel diminished and outclassed from the start. I hoped Sarah would learn from her. She would need it.

The two girls waved their thanks to the bus driver and stepped out into the sunshine, blinking against the glare. I stepped down after them and there, in the middle of the sidewalk, in a quiet suburban neighborhood, with sunlight spilling around us, I felt a stab of evil so pervasive and powerful that I clutched my hands around my middle as if that might, somehow, protect me from it.

I looked around, seeing nothing but a deserted block and empty houses, doors locked against the world while their inhabitants were away, extra cars lined neatly at the curb and in driveways. I felt the danger, though, and I felt it in every fiber of my being. I knew it was there. It was the same darkness that had lingered over the body of Vicky Meeks.

Her killer was near.

The girls walked down the sidewalk together, chatting about inconsequential matters, oblivious to what I felt. When they reached the corner, Sarah turned right and the other girl turned left. They waved each other a farewell.

An SUV parked to my right abruptly pulled out from the curb and rolled down the street, the sound of its engine unnoticed by anyone but me. I turned around to get a better look at the driver. I could feel the choking darkness drawing closer. It was shiny black and its windows were tinted as deeply as the law allowed, hiding its driver from view. I’d seen it before—I’d seen it following Maggie.

Tinted windows could not stop me. Within seconds, I sat in the front seat next to the driver, surrounded by the smells of new leather seats—and a feeling of danger so pervasive it sucked the very oxygen from the air.

The driver was Alan Hayes.

He sat behind the wheel, his back ramrod straight, his tie perfectly knotted, his shoes immaculate and gleaming, his expensive suit custom fit

to his frame. He did not look like a man who had been questioned by police the night before. He looked like the leader of a European conglomerate, tall, sophisticated, and utterly successful.

I clung to how he looked, not wanting to believe that the feeling of danger came from him. I told myself that he was just a nervous father following his daughter home from the bus stop, anxious to see that she was safe. Overprotective, perhaps, and maybe for the wrong reasons, but he had lost one daughter, so the fear of losing another would be very real for him. Surely he was not the source of the darkness surrounding us—would I not have sensed such distilled evil the night before, in his home?

He turned left, away from Sarah, following the other girl.

I peered at his profile, trying to read his thoughts. I could penetrate nothing, though I could see tension in the way he held his jaw and sensed an anger in him, perhaps triggered by his encounter with Maggie the night before. I felt a need rising in him and I was afraid to examine it more closely. I did not want to know what that need was. I did not want to know it even existed.

The girl picked up her gait. Her hair began to swing back and forth with each long stride. I felt the rising need in the car shift, feral and unpredictable, as if an animal had stirred in the shadows of the backseat.

It was coming from Hayes. Eagerness roiled off him in waves as he crept along, hidden in his car, following the girl. His tension was gone, subsumed by a hunter's obsession. He focused on the girl with an unwavering, relentless concentration that made his eyes glitter. His breath was coming in shallow gasps and he kept touching his lips with the tip of his tongue, as if he were tasting something delicious. His nostrils flared, though he could not possibly smell her, and a smile crossed over his face. It was not the kind of smile to inspire happiness. It was a smile of self-satisfaction to come.

I was afraid.

I knew he could not see me. I knew he could not touch me.

Still, I was afraid.

The young girl continued her walk down the block, each stride as regal as the one before. She was unaware that she was being watched, protected by her youth from knowing that evil could strike even when you were close to home, that evil could claim you even in bright sunlight.

She turned into the driveway of a ranch house that sprawled across a generous lot surrounded by six-foot-high bushes for privacy. Hayes slowed the SUV and drew to a stop along the curb. He shut the engine off and waited, the smile on his face stretching wider. He knew what was about to come.

The young girl bent over, revealing the backs of her thighs and a flash of pink as her skirt inched up over her legs. Hayes groaned softly, his relentless self-control crumbling. I felt no desire at what I was seeing, only fear for what might happen next. The girl stuck her hand in a small opening at the back base of the steps, where latticework and smaller shrubs nearly concealed a small crawl space. Extracting a small gray rock, she turned it over and slid something toward her: a tab that opened to reveal a tiny compartment. In the compartment, I knew, was a house key.

Hayes knew it, too. He laughed quietly—it was a rattling sound that had no humor in it—as the girl replaced the fake rock in its now-useless hiding spot, then skipped up the steps and let herself in the front door of the house she thought of as home, the place she considered safer than all other places in the world. She slipped the key into a jacket pocket as she stepped inside.

Hayes waited a moment, checked the empty street and sidewalks to make sure he was alone, then slipped soundlessly from the front seat of his car. Within seconds, he was gone from sight, having disappeared down the driveway, where towering bushes protected him from any neighbor's eyes.

I followed. He did not hurry. His movements were not the slightest bit furtive. He walked as calmly as if he were striding the halls of the college and intent on being in class on time—until he stepped abruptly sideways with practiced ease and disappeared between two tall spruce bushes guarding the back corner of the house. It was the perfect hiding spot. His tall frame was concealed in the shadows between the elongated branches of the spruce pines, yet he stood only inches from the sliding glass doors that formed the back wall of the corner room. He had a perfect view inside.

He found his spot and waited, growing completely still, content to bide his time. He had done this before.

What would he say if someone discovered him, standing among the bushes, impeccably clad? What possible excuse could he give for being there?



But he was not concerned with being caught. He knew he would not be caught. I could feel his certainty that he was in control. That nothing would interfere with what he wanted to take from the girl.

The girl.

I stood as close I could bear to Hayes, wary of his spiritual poison, still trying to probe his thoughts. Emotions slipped out of his unnatural control every now and then, occasionally shifting like the currents of a spring-fed lake, colliding, adjusting, running hot and then cold. I felt triumph flare prematurely for an instant, a steadier flickering of desire, a vein of fury that threaded through them all, and beneath that, an utterly self-congratulatory assurance that he had dominion over his quarry.

The girl entered the back room of the house, holding a bowl of popcorn and a can of diet soda. She was wearing a pale blue tank top that revealed the thin straps of her pink bra beneath. The gym shorts she had changed into were barely larger than a bikini bottom and of a material so worn they were nearly translucent.

She placed her snack on the floor by a rumpled old couch, arranged the pillows just so, then flopped down and flicked on the TV. As a soap opera emerged from the static, she draped one of her impossibly long legs over the back of the sofa, freed her hair so it spread out behind her in a fan and settled down into the cushions as if she did not have a bone in her body. Sprawled on the old couch, watched, she thought, by no one, she was completely without guile—making her seem even younger than her years. The girl in the woman emerged from beneath the stern eyes and scathing wisdom about men. She was an ever-changing chimera, moving from one form to the other in seconds, depending on your desire, from girl to woman, from woman to girl and back again. The effect was, I admit, charming.

For Hayes, it was something else. He was dancing with a desire that raged inside him, warring with his self-control. So far, as he gazed through the glass at the girl, his self-control was winning. I could feel his heart beating steadily in his chest, skipping only when she shifted and rearranged her long limbs across the couch. His breathing, shallow and excited at first, had grown steadier with each passing moment. He drew inside himself, his strength turning inward, thoughts lost in some unfathomable fantasy.

His pulse did not hasten. His pulse did not waver.

He was where he wanted to be. This was what he had craved: the watching, the waiting, the wanting but not having, the exquisite torture of desire.

He was deeply excited, and I could feel the lust moving through his blood but I could not tell what it was he lusted for. I only knew it was not love or even sexual in a sense I could understand. It was far more primal than that.

The young girl, bored with her show, grew restless. She began to eat her popcorn with disinterested motions, then glanced at a computer in one corner of the room and back to the television set. She spilled some soda on her tank top and made a face before pulling its hem up to her mouth to suck at the stain. Her torso was long and muscled and the color of honey, remnants of a summer tan.

Hayes groaned again. It was little more than a sigh, but I heard it and it frightened me. It was a whisper of warning: he was not always in control.

And this was a girl barely older than his daughter, a girl remarkably like his daughter, in fact, in so many ways.

I could not leave her to him.

I stood beside him, the ugliness of his need washing over me, the dark urgency of his excitement infiltrating my being, and the power of his predatory stasis filling me with despair.

This was a man to be feared. This was a man in waiting. This was a man who knew exactly how it would all end.

The girl was gazing out the sliding doors now, distracted by something she saw. She rose, walked barefoot across the thick carpet, and unlocked one set of doors. Hayes began to breathe more quickly. Had she looked to her left, she would have easily seen him, but she did not look and he was as still as the spruce shrubs that flanked him. Even the air around him did not move. It seemed to collapse inward, as if he were a dead spot in a sea of wind. Hopelessness. No escape. Death.

The girl pulled one of the glass doors open and stepped out onto the back deck, where she stood on tiptoe to check the contents of a bird feeder hanging from the branches of a tree planted close by. Her thigh muscles stretched and Hayes flinched, his right hand trembling, before he regained control.

The girl scolded a squirrel that was sitting triumphantly on the branch behind the bird feeder and munching on tiny fistfuls of grain. He chewed, unconcerned, as she reached down beside a set of back deck stairs, where a row of plastic trash cans were lined up. She opened the first one and bent over to retrieve a bag stored inside it, her back turned to the house.

Hayes stiffened, his entire body poised as if for flight. He was gauging the distance between the corner of the house and the open back door. He took a single step forward, arms tensed at his side.

A phone rang inside the house.

The girl popped her head up from the trash can, listening for the sound, then hurried back inside to a cordless phone by the computer. She knew who it was before she even picked up the receiver and launched into a soliloquy that was half exasperated and half loving.

"Hi, Daddy," she said as she returned to the deck. She cradled the receiver between her shoulder and ear and attempted to refill the bird feeder while she talked. "I'm fine. Yes, I got home safely. No, I didn't flunk the test. Yes, I'll water the flowers. No, your package didn't come. Yes, I know I have piano at six. No, I don't want to eat Indian food tonight." She paused and then laughed. "Okay, so I can't read your mind completely. I'll have a chicken burrito. But stop worrying. I'm home and I'm fine."

A frown crossed over her face. "Okay," she conceded. "I think you left it by the front door. Give me a minute and I'll call you back."

She placed the phone on the railing of the deck, finished filling the bird feeder, then good-naturedly left a pile of seeds and nuts for the squirrel along a far railing. "Stop being a pig," she admonished it. "There's plenty for everyone."

The squirrel ignored her. His body had grown still. He'd spotted Hayes in the bushes and his black eyes glittered like tiny black beads as he stared at us.

The young girl did not notice. She put the bag of grain back in place, retrieved the phone, and headed inside, pulling the door shut behind her.

She did not lock it.

Hayes saw it all. His breath, which had been as controlled as a yogi's, became a series of rapid gusts. He leaned forward, risking detection, as he tracked her movements through the room. She replaced the phone in its

cradle, headed for the door to the hallway, then stopped and turned toward the sliding doors again, looking uncertain.

Hayes stepped back into his hiding spot and held his breath. She hesitated, still staring at the sliding glass door. My mind raced through every horror movie I had ever seen, willing her to remember what happened to foolish young girls who failed to lock their back doors. *Come on*, I willed her across the divide of space and glass, *give me a thought I can hang on to*.

I was too agitated, too frightened to make contact with her. That infinitesimal interval of two seconds seemed an eternity before she finally walked across the room, checked the door, and finding it unlocked, locked it with a nervous smile, as if thinking herself foolish for worrying.

I was filled with an overwhelming relief. Not today, at least. Not today.

But he knew where she kept her key and I knew the day would come when he would no longer be able to wait.

The fury in Hayes flared with frustration, but he shut it down at once. He was too much in control to let a small setback stop him. And, I suspected, this watching was as exquisite to him as foreplay. He did not want to hurry this stage, even though part of him did, and so he accepted his loss of opportunity without rancor. He glanced at his watch, then stepped calmly from his hiding place, checking the driveway and sidewalks for privacy first. He made it back to his car unseen by anyone but me.

I realized then that he had never once hurried, had never once displayed hesitation or confusion. His timing was perfect, his movements precise, his presence undetected by anyone.

Hayes had done this many times before.

## Chapter 18



I left Alan Hayes, my mind troubled by what I had learned about him. Following a young girl didn't prove he'd killed Alissa, but I had felt what he was capable of and it scared me. How could I let Maggie know that there was something off-kilter about Hayes, regardless of what Danny thought of him? He was no grieving father. He was a predator who needed to be stopped. Not rehabilitated. Just stopped. I had met his kind before, though rarely. Men like him were dispassionate enough about their crimes to evade capture for decades. But they always went back to the well. They had to. They could not survive without tasting the humiliation of others.

I thought back to the case files from the investigation that Danny and I bungled so thoroughly. Would anything in there put Maggie on to Hayes? Would his behavior last night be enough to alarm her? Could Danny somehow be persuaded to raise the issue himself?

Would Danny be of any use at all? He'd been stupid enough to interfere with Maggie's investigation. What else might he try? And why was he trying to block a new investigation? I had to find out.

Maggie had not told Gonzales about Danny's appearance the night before. If she had, he'd be gone. You did not defy Gonzales directly like that. Ever. Instead, I found Danny at work, where he had been relegated, sitting at a desk in the Found Property section—a department where his surliness would be tempered by the public's joy that their stolen possessions had, miraculously, been recovered. Plus, there was very little work, as virtually nothing of value was ever reported as found. Gonzales was smart. It was the perfect place for Danny to wait out the five months until he retired. There would be little asked of him and even less that he could screw up.

But Danny, being Danny, did not intend to make things easy on himself. As always, he loved to invite disappointment. He sat at his desk, in full view of others, reading skin magazines and sneaking sips from a flask in his top drawer, occasionally begrudgingly taking a message from some hopeful victim wanting to know if his bike or lawn mower had been recovered. Few people noticed Danny's blatantly antagonistic behavior as coworkers had long since learned the best way to endure Danny was to ignore him. Perhaps that was why he had escalated his apathy in recent years, flaunting his disregard for what others thought. He had a deep need for attention, and he did not care if it was positive or negative attention. Ever since his life had failed to measure up to his dreams, he'd been driven by a compulsion to provoke and spread his unhappiness. I knew because I had seen that compulsion take root and grow.

But something else was tormenting him that morning, something beyond being reassigned by Gonzales. Was it the night before, the scene with Hayes, or the barely disguised accusation of cowardice Gonzales had thrown at him? I did not blame Danny for my death. I had died of my own incompetence and no one else's. That didn't mean Danny saw it the same way.

I sat and watched my old partner for a while, wondering how well he had investigated Alan Hayes and whether he would ever be willing to admit that he had blown it. Danny's agitation grew steadily as he sat at the desk, finally becoming so severe I wondered if he was taking something. I'd known him to rely on speed—or worse—before. He began to flip more rapidly through the pages of his magazine, not even bothering to glance down. Finally, he gave up entirely and threw the porn in a bottom drawer before booting up the department's computer network. This act alone astonished me. Danny had treated anything related to the computer with contempt, maintaining that all it did was add to his workload. Yet there he sat, searching through computerized records, checking out who in the department was online, following some unknown cyber trail with a determination I had not seen from him in years.

He was tracking Maggie. As he pulled up our old case files, at least the ones that had been computerized, I realized he was checking the dates to see the last time they had been accessed, trying to determine whether

Maggie had reviewed each file or not. He was wondering how much she was checking up on him and whether Gonzales had ordered her to do so.

What a fool, I thought. Did he not realize that he was leaving his own trail of having been in those files? That Maggie could just as easily track him in return?

Oh, Danny. That was my partner in a nutshell. Always so busy thinking of his own grandiose plans that he never stopped to consider what someone else might be doing.

I left him and drifted upstairs to Maggie's desk to wait for her arrival. She showed up in late afternoon, freshly showered, smelling of oranges, crackling with energy. Oh, my Maggie. She did not need me to tell her that something was wrong with Alan Hayes. The encounter the night before had been enough for her. Within ten minutes, she was deep into the computer, bringing up all the data she could find on Alissa's father, downloading his curriculum vitae from the college site, tracking his lecture appearances at conferences around the world, chronicling all the places where he had studied or taught—in short, compiling a list of everywhere he had been and everywhere he had lived over the past twenty-five years. It was astonishing how much information she pulled from the Internet, her attention so absolute that hours passed before she even noticed that almost everyone else in the detective division had left for home or dinner.

Once again, I wondered what drove her so hard, what triggered her obsessiveness.

Her desk phone rang. It was an old-fashioned model and she stared at it as if surprised that it even worked. "Hello?" she said tentatively. "Hello?" She stared into the receiver, then placed it firmly back on the cradle, thought a moment, and picked it back up and dialed.

"Dad?" she asked. "Did you just try to call me at work?" She was silent. "No, it's nothing. Not a lot of people have this number is all." She smiled at his reply. "No, I have not been giving my number out to men. Who in the world told you that?" A shadow crossed over her face. "She's getting senile. Trust me. You'll be the first to know."

She smiled again at her father's answer before bidding him good-bye. She'd barely hung up the phone when Danny appeared, shattering the quiet of the squad room with his blustery, panting approach.

"So, Princess," he said, perching on the edge of her desk. "How goes it?"

“Don’t call me that,” she said, without anger. “I’ve worked harder than you ever have to get where I am. And get off my desk.”

Danny looked surprised, but recovered and shambled to his feet. “I was wondering if you wanted to get a drink.”

Maggie looked up from the computer and stared at him without comment.

“I’m not hitting on you,” Danny said quickly.

She ignored him and returned to her computer screen.

“Look,” he said. “I’m sorry. I was an asshole. And Fahey and I were fuckups, I admit it.”

Speak for yourself, partner. I wasn’t the one who’d been responsible for looking into Alan Hayes and the rest of the family.

“Maybe I could make up for last night,” he suggested. “I owe you one.” He sounded sincere. “Really. Thanks for not telling Gonzales about . . . you know, what happened.”

“You mean you showing up drunk out of your mind in the middle of an investigation you’d been expressly taken off and inciting the witness to cause the department trouble?”

Danny blinked. “I don’t know that I’d put it that way exactly.”

“Well, I would,” Maggie said. “And Tommy and Fritz agree. I had a hell of a time convincing them not to say anything.”

Danny’s voice rose an octave. “I know that. And I’m grateful. I just want to make up for it. You can ask me anything about the Hayes case you want. I might remember something that could be of use to you.”

“I’m not telling you anything about the case,” she told him flatly. “Not after last night. You’re lucky you still have your badge.”

“I won’t ask you a thing. It’ll be a one-way street. You need me. You know how it goes. You can pore through the files from now until Christmas, but there are still things we never wrote down. Things that might help you now.”

She stared at him, weighing her desire to avoid him versus her desire to solve the case. The case won. “Okay,” she said. “But we’re going someplace decent with real food. This is my dinner break and I am not spending it getting drunk with you in some dive bar. Got it?”

“Deal.” Danny held both hands up in surrender, but I felt something odd rolling off him, an emotion I could not pinpoint until he looked down at the



floor, unable to meet Maggie's eyes. Then I had it: Danny was afraid. Why?

"I've only got an hour, tops," she warned him.

"Fine."

"Give me a moment," she said, grabbing her knapsack and heading for the hallway. "I'll be right back."

I think I knew what was going to happen before Danny did. The moment the squad room door shut behind Maggie, I knew he would not be able to resist the unlocked drawers of her desk. Hands trembling, he pulled them open, one by one, flipped through files, lifted stacks of paper, pocketed something small he found in a top drawer—I could not see what—then stopped abruptly when he ran across the old photo that Peggy had given Maggie, the one showing Danny and me posed, rifles high, above a bound suspect. Maggie had stashed it at the back of a lower drawer, behind some hanging folders. When Danny pulled it out and saw what it was, his face went white. He started shaking so hard I thought he might be having a heart attack. He looked down at the photo, then up at the squad room door, stunned by a fear I did not understand. It was only when he heard Maggie's footsteps approaching that he recovered from his paralysis. Shoving the photo back in place, he shut the drawer and took a seat on the edge of Maggie's desk just as she returned.

"Get off my desk, Bonaventura," she barked at him.

"No problem," he said. His voice sounded rusty. "It's just been a long day."

"Then don't make it any longer," Maggie said. "Let's get this over with."

## Chapter 19



Being a drunk has its advantages, with loss of pride being the most merciful of them. But lack of pride was a trait I no longer shared with Danny, and so it was that I felt embarrassed for him when I realized how many of the other restaurant patrons were sneaking glances at him, wondering what a drunken old slob was doing with such a lovely young woman.

Had people looked at me that same way when I was stumbling through the last years of my life? I couldn't recall and I was glad I had been spared the self-awareness of how far I had fallen. There had certainly been plenty of times I had invited contempt, including right here in this same restaurant. I had often taken the women I was running around with here for dinner, knowing all it would take was that one meal to get her into bed and that my investment in both time and money would be limited. I wasn't proud of it, and I hadn't been proud of it back then. Drinking had helped me overlook that.

Maggie sat as far away from Danny as she could, but, to her credit, she appeared perfectly composed. I knew she was aware of Danny's drunken state. She had reacted to his order of a double bourbon with something close to contempt. But she was determined to get what she could out of him. I admired her perseverance.

"Did you even look into the father as a suspect at all?" she asked Danny as soon as the waiter left with their orders.

"Fahey took care of it," Danny answered, taking a gulp from his bourbon on the rocks.

The lying bastard. He'd been the one to pursue family members. I'd had my hands full interviewing classmates and tracking the boyfriend's movements.

“Fahey seems to have taken care of a lot of things when he was your partner,” Maggie observed. She had ordered a glass of white wine, but it sat untouched in front of her. Danny had that effect on people: he made them treasure their sobriety.

“Look, I admit Fahey had lost his edge,” Danny conceded. “It’s possible he missed something.”

“I’ve looked over the report,” Maggie said. “I’m no expert, but the interview notes with the father look an awful lot like your lousy typing, Danny. So why don’t you cut the crap and tell me what you remember?”

Danny would not look her in the eye. “I don’t remember much of anything,” he said after a moment. “I remember the guy was pretty broken up. He’d just lost his daughter and he’d lost his wife only a couple of years before that. How hard was I supposed to push him?”

“I think he did it,” Maggie said flatly. “I think he killed his own daughter and I think he killed Vicky Meeks.”

Danny stared at her, amazed. “You can’t mean that.”

“I can,” she said. “And I do. There is something deeply wrong in that family, something terribly wrong. Anyone could feel it. How the hell could you miss it? You and Fahey let a killer walk free and now he’s done it again. And god knows how many other young women died before Vicky Meeks.”

“Look, the guy’s a little fruity. Maybe creepy even. But he’s not the killer.”

“How do you know?” Maggie asked.

“His wife alibied him.”

“His wife?” Maggie said. “The Russian? Come on. She’s a mail-order bride if ever I saw one. She would have been in America, what? Two months at the time? She would have said anything he told her to say.”

“She’d been in America over a year when I talked to her, and she’s no pushover. Take it from me. That woman is made of iron.”

“So, you remember something after all,” Maggie said.

Danny shrugged. “I may have refreshed my memory a little by looking over the notes.”

“Not much to refresh with those notes,” Maggie pointed out.

“Hey, am I supposed to take the rap for Fahey not giving a shit?” Danny asked. “I tried to save my partner’s life, and now I have to take shit for all

of his mistakes on top of people giving me shit for mine?”

Maggie shook her head in disgust. She looked at Danny so strangely, I suddenly knew: she had heard every word Gonzales had said about my death and the role of Danny’s inertia in it.

I wondered if Danny realized it.

“Well?” Danny asked.

“Well, what?” Maggie replied.

“You got a boyfriend?” he said. Oh, god, I thought—was he really drunk enough to think he had a chance?

“Are you seriously asking me that?” Maggie demanded.

“I’m just making conversation,” Danny said, sounding perplexed as he retreated from all that the question had implied and tried to pretend he was just being friendly.

“Make conversation about something else,” Maggie said flatly.

“Okay, fine. Are you looking into anything else?” Danny asked, a little too casually, as he ran his thumb over the lip of his glass. His drink was gone. He’d sucked it down in four gulps and gestured for another before Maggie had even tasted hers.

“You mean, am I looking into anything besides the Hayes and Meeks cases?”

“Yeah. Does Gonzales have you looking into anything else?” Though he was trying to sound uninterested, I could feel it again: fear rolling off Danny in waves. He had started to perspire and was looking around for the waiter bearing his new drink.

“Why would Gonzales ask me to look into anything else?” Maggie said softly.

“You’re the golden girl,” Danny told her glumly. “Obviously, you’re his pet right now. I just thought . . .”

“You just thought what?” Maggie hissed back. For the first time, I had a glimpse of the immense anger she was capable of when crossed. And, oh, she was magnificent.

“You just assumed because he trusted me to do my job that I was sleeping with him and must be his pet snitch?” she said.

“I didn’t say that,” Danny protested with the kind of truly dumbfounded look that only a drunk can produce.

The waiter arrived with Danny's fresh drink and gave Maggie a sympathetic look. She touched his arm lightly. "I need that steak to go after all, Sam. I got beeped and have to go back in."

The waiter nodded and withdrew without looking at Danny.

"No," Danny insisted, rising. He drained his new drink. "I can take a hint. Enjoy your dinner in peace. I've got to get home anyway."

He stumbled out before she could reply.

I stayed with Maggie, waiting quietly in Danny's vacated seat, looking around at the couples with their heads bent together and the noisy groups who were dining together. It was the most wonderful of rituals, I realized, humans breaking bread, sipping wine, tasting the delights of food. I was sorry I had shoveled it in my whole life, either eating furtively because I did not respect myself or eating grudgingly because it took away from the time and room I had for drinking. Now I saw that people connected to one another by sharing the act of feeding their bodies. I noticed how it relaxed people, how it coaxed laughter to the surface and brought out goodwill toward all.

I missed having a chance to enjoy that.

The waiter had seen Danny leave and brought out Maggie's dinner without bothering to ask if she still wanted it to go. She ate slowly, lost in thought, not noticing the waiter, who hovered around her, anxious to make her meal a pleasant one. I wished that I could tell what she was thinking. She was far away, puzzling over some detail, putting pieces of information together, focusing all of her energy on some mental task—all the while completely unaware of how rare her concentration was.

When she was done, I confess I allowed myself the indulgence of pretending I was alive. As the coat-check girl helped Maggie into her coat, I placed my hands on the woolen shoulders, as if guiding them into place, then I imagined that her smile of thanks was for me.

I had seldom displayed such gallantry while alive. But now I saw that these minor acts were the ways by which people paid homage to a life lived among others—and that I had robbed more than my wife, Connie, of their grace.

Maggie was still distracted as she climbed into her car and headed back toward headquarters. The steak house she had chosen was five miles out of town on a winding two-lane highway and there were few other businesses

or homes nearby. Within a minute, we had left the lights of the parking lot behind and were deep into the dark of a country road at night. I sat in the backseat, stretched out, peering out at the darkness, watching the night world whoosh by. Far behind us, I could see twin pinpricks of light, another car, perhaps miles away, approaching fast.

I felt Maggie's car wobble and then start to shudder before she did. At first, she did not want to acknowledge the problem. She gripped the steering wheel tighter and forced the car back on the road, but it wandered toward the shoulder once again, then began to dip and rock in a rhythm that was unmistakable: one of her tires was flat.

I felt a flash of frustration from her as she steered the car off the road. Her flashlight was stored in the glove compartment and she got it out before she climbed out into the almost complete darkness to take a look. Overhead, the night sky was filled with clouds, with little ambient light to relieve the gloom.

As I followed her, I noticed the twin pinpricks of light growing closer, yet not as quickly as I had imagined they might. The car behind us was slowing. Perhaps they had seen Maggie's brake lights and would stop to help.

Maggie knelt in the darkness and surveyed the damage. The tire was shredded beyond repair. She sighed and headed for the trunk to retrieve her spare. I stayed behind and examined the tire. We had not hit anything; I would surely have felt the bump. What in the world had caused such damage? I examined the black rubber and saw fine grooves crisscrossing the heavier tread, then spotted a stub of metal driven deep into the rubber: knife marks and a nail. The flat tire was deliberate.

The headlights behind us grew closer.

I was overwhelmed with a foreboding of danger so intense I acted without thinking first. Whoever was following Maggie thought she was alone. I would show them otherwise.

I stepped into the road and stood in the very center of the lane, staring down the oncoming headlights.

Then I remembered that I was invisible to the living and so my actions were futile.

I could do nothing but watch as the car crested a dip in the road and slowed as it drew near. The headlights blinded me, but I could make out a

solitary figure behind the wheel: someone large, dressed in a heavy overcoat.

Maggie was in danger.

I willed myself to be seen. I concentrated with all of my being as I lifted my hands above my head and focused my attention on the unknown driver, twisting my face into a warning, letting him or her know that I would not stand by while harm came to my Maggie.

It was useless, I knew. But still, I had to try.

A miracle happened. Just as the car reached us and Maggie lifted her head to see who was approaching, the driver pulled the steering wheel violently to the right. With a screech of rubber, the car veered around me and over into the oncoming lane, then shot past, missing me by inches.

Maggie stared after the car, puzzled at its behavior.

I stared, too, even more puzzled. Because the car had veered around *me*—it had changed its course because of *me*.

Whoever was driving had seen me.

## Chapter 20



I was missing something and it nagged at me. Why had Danny left Maggie so abruptly at dinner? Had that been him in the car behind her? Or had it been Hayes? And if it was Hayes, how had he known where she'd be? Was it someone else entirely, someone I was overlooking? I tried to remember the size of the headlights, to gauge the car's height, but it had happened too quickly and I had been panicked.

It all led back to Danny.

I waited with Maggie while she changed her tire, then I headed back to town with her, trying to figure out what to do next along the way. We passed the Double Deuce, its neon lights blinking out their promise of TEQUILA SHOTS and COYOTE UGLY GIRLS, though the women who danced on the bar of the Double Deuce had more in common with ugly than with girls. A job as a dancer there was one step above being a prostitute, and I mean that pretty much literally. The moment most of them stepped down from the bar, they became one. I knew because I'd visited there often on the job, tracking down murders, busting dealers, and most often, dragging reluctant witnesses to court on time. It was a favorite hangout of recidivists and criminals smart enough not to be caught. So much so that I had avoided it on my days off, on the theory that it was mixing business with pleasure.

Still, it was just the sort of place where Danny would be, nursing his wounds at Maggie's rejection, or cooking up some drunken scheme to get what he was after. I needed to find out what it was that he was after.

When she stopped at the intersection near the Double Deuce, I slipped from Maggie's car and searched the parking lot of the bar. There was no sign of Danny's car, and the place was way too far out of town for anyone to be there without one. I stuck my head in the door, just in case, following



a blousy bottle blonde in too-tight jeans inside after she was done doing a biker and a couple lines of coke in the backseat of her car. As the double doors opened, I was hit with a wave of bad air, badasses, bad smells, and the sounds of Bad Company over the sound system.

But no Danny.

I returned to the parking lot just as a group of bikers staggered out, ready to weave their way home or to the next bar. What the hell. It had been a long day. I'd hitch a ride back to town on a chopper and go from there.

When a behemoth with forearms the size of hams climbed on a souped-up Harley and revved his engine, I didn't hesitate. I clambered on behind him, wrapped my arms around his black leather jacket, and admired the death skull embroidered on its back. He pulled out of the parking lot and took off like a rocket. It was a pleasant ride to town, full of lights whooshing past, sudden sounds that would buzz like angry bees and be long gone, far behind us, before I could recognize them, and a cold wind that swept away my worries. I tipped my head back and let the biker's excessive speed sweep me away. I was filled with wonder at the night.

I enjoyed my ride so much that I was reluctant to leave my big friend behind by the time we reached the center of town. But all things—both good and bad—must come to an end. I climbed down and patted my oblivious host on his massive shoulders in thanks. He unwittingly belched a rumbling reply. I headed for Shenanigan's as it was only a few blocks away. If Danny was anywhere, it was probably there. It was his comfort zone, the next best thing to passing out at your own kitchen table.

Danny was not there among the tired room of regulars, but I discovered his car parked on a side street. The sight of it sitting alone beneath a streetlight gave me a bad feeling. There was only one other place nearby where he'd be.

It was past midnight, but obsession doesn't keep regular hours. I fully expected to see Danny hiding beneath the big tree growing partway down the block near my house, spying on Connie and the kids. But I was wrong. Danny had not been content with spying. And I knew it when I was still almost a block away. Connie's voice carried for miles when she was mad.

She was standing on the front porch, barefoot and wearing a bathrobe. And she was up in Danny's grill well and good. I was beside her in seconds. What the hell did Danny think he was doing? Enough was enough.

But Connie didn't need my help, which was fortunate since there was nothing I could have done. "Get the hell off my property," she yelled at Danny. "Get the hell off my porch and don't come back."

"Come on, Connie," Danny wheedled, too drunk to recognize the warning signs: Connie's hands were balled up into fists. A wise man stepped back when he saw that. "I just wanted to take a look around."

"I'm going to tell you this one more time, you drunken, pathetic piece of Irish-Italian crap," Connie answered. I knew she was just warming up. I recognized the tone: Danny was going to take the brunt for his own drunken nonsense, plus the heat for all the years Connie had had to put up with mine and, before me, with her father's.

"Kevin never brought his work home," she yelled at him. "He barely did it at the station, for chrissakes, and I've never heard of the Hayes case. He never said a word to me about it, which you should know, since you were his partner and he probably never said a damn word to you about anything, either. Number two, I am not about to let you into my house, where my children sleep, either in your current condition or in the unlikely event you are ever sober again. Especially just so you can root around in search of pieces of paper you think you *might* find. Because those notes do not exist, and you know why else? Because you are never going to be a part of my life again after this moment. I'm done. You're done. Now go."

Danny blinked and took a step back, confused by her fury or cowed by her strength. I'm not sure it mattered which. The point was that he was paralyzed.

"Don't think I don't know that you're up to something," Connie warned him. "Since when do you give a shit about anything you do? I don't for a moment believe you give a crap about this Hayes case. I don't know what you're looking for, but you're not going to find it in my house. And if you ever come back—ever, Danny—I will call the commander personally and I will tell him that you are harassing me, and I guarantee you that you will be out on your ass before you can sneeze. You got it?"

Danny still could not pull it together enough to react, but Connie did not require validation from him. She marched inside the house, slamming the door in Danny's face.

*That's my girl*, I thought proudly to myself. Or, rather, that was my girl.

Danny stood on the edge of the porch, teetering precariously backward toward the steps, looking as if he was not quite sure where he was. Man, he was loaded. Danny was off the charts. I was horrified at the thought he might actually get in his car and drive—I'd have company in the afterlife then for sure—but before Danny could reach his car, a black SUV pulled up beside him. The window rolled down. Alan Hayes was waiting behind the wheel.

"She wouldn't let me in," Danny slurred miserably. "I couldn't find out a thing."

"It's okay, buddy," Hayes said soothingly. He opened the passenger door. "There was probably nothing to find anyway. Get in. I'll buy you a cup of coffee and some breakfast."

Now, technically, the invitation wasn't for me. But I was damned if I'd leave them now. I wanted to know how long they'd been buddies. I climbed into the backseat and it was as clean as the day it had rolled off the assembly line, though the effect was marred somewhat by the reek that came from Danny, a mixture of alcohol, sweat, and cheap aftershave.

"What happened?" Hayes asked Danny as he headed for a busy franchise-lined road a few blocks away near the highway. That made me happy. I loved coffee shops and that strip was full of them. With any luck, they would order coffee and doughnuts and I could at least sit there and smell the combination.

Danny had not answered Hayes and seemed to have forgotten there had even been a question. He was even farther gone than I'd thought.

But Hayes was as determined as Connie. If he had to sober Danny up first, so be it, but he'd get what he wanted before the night was through. He pulled into the parking lot of a Denny's and led Danny inside to a booth, where he left him slumped in drunken contentment before leaving to wash his hands. I can't say I blamed him. Danny pulled the ambience of the joint way down, and that was tough to do without breaking the law.

I glanced around at the weary patrons scattered around the dining room. At this hour, in this block, it was mostly filled with hookers taking a break, highway drivers fueling up on coffee, an occasional trucker overloading on cheap eats, and college kids trying to find the right combination of food and caffeine to keep them going all night.

There was usually a cop or two among the mix, but tonight there were just two detectives: one drunk and one dead. We made quite the pair.

I had to choose where to sit. I could either endure Danny's reek, or I could sit next to Hayes and be bathed in the despair that had started to overwhelm me whenever I was near him. I decided to take a seat in the empty booth adjacent to theirs, where we'd be separated by little more than a half-wall divider. When Hayes returned from the washroom, he stood for a moment staring down at a near-slumbering Danny. Hayes was wearing a gray golf shirt and a pair of charcoal gray pants, both so precisely ironed they looked fresh from the rack. He had no expression on his face, nor could I discern a trace of his emotions. He simply stared, his unnaturally dark eyes taking in every detail of Danny, noting his rumpled clothes and stained shirt, the unwashed hair lying in limp strands across his ruddy skull, the unmatched socks, the class ring where a wedding band would be worn. His eyes flickered over Danny's greasy all-weather coat, folded haphazardly beside my old partner, and then he shook his head lightly, as if to wake himself from a trance, and pulled a handkerchief from a pants pocket. Wiping the seat down with it, he sat across from Danny and said loudly, "Detective Bonaventura."

Danny sat up straight, startled, recognized Hayes, and pretended to have been alert the entire time. It was a sad ritual and fooled no one but Danny. But he needed to do it anyway. "Yes?" Danny asked. "How was the restroom?"

Hayes hesitated, peering at Danny over the menu. "Fine, thank you."

The waitress arrived and it was clear she had seen Hayes wipe down the booth. It had offended her. She was a black woman with an elaborate ringlet hairdo and she gave Hayes a contemptuous look. I was surprised. I felt a flare of anger in Hayes so swift and so strong it was as if he had raised a hot poker and was preparing to swing. He reeled his fury back in and ignored the woman as she produced a grimy bar cloth, then insisted on scrubbing the tabletop vigorously while Danny stared on, befuddled.

Hayes lowered the menu so that only his black eyes showed above it. He stared at the waitress and she froze, having seen something in his eyes she recognized. "That will be fine, thank you," Hayes said in a clipped voice. The waitress, in a hurry now to get away, slipped the cloth into her apron pocket and pulled out a pad and pen. She did not look at Hayes again.

After ordering black coffee for himself, Hayes waited, not speaking, while Danny wolfed down a huge platter of hash browns, eggs, and sausages, then drained two cups of coffee. I guess walking out on dinner with Maggie had put a crimp in his eating schedule. I couldn't imagine what his guts were like these days. It was a wonder he was still walking around. His body was poisoned hourly by what he put into it. "That hit the spot," he said when he was done. He patted his belly, gulped down a quart-sized glass of cola, and announced he needed to drain his lizard.

Hayes did not so much as twitch a face muscle during the entire spectacle. I thought of a spider, sitting immobile in its web, watching the death struggle of a fly, neither curious nor triumphant, just existing until it was time to feed.

Still, the low-class nature of the entire scene irritated Hayes. That's the downside of getting other people to do your dirty work, I thought to myself. Good help is so hard to find. While he waited for Danny to come back from the bathroom, Hayes stacked Danny's dirty dishes in a pile and slid them as far away as he could. The waitress swooped down from nowhere, collected the dishes without a word, and was gone within seconds. Hayes did not say anything, but the vein near the corner of his right eye began to pulse. That waitress was getting to him. I knew why. He could not control her.

I wondered what time the waitress got off work.

I wondered if she would make it home.

"Hello, young man." A creaky voice interrupted my thoughts.

I looked up and was both startled and horrified to find an old lady wrapped in a ragged purple sweater talking directly to me. I was too stunned to answer.

"You just getting off your shift? Catch any bad guys tonight?" Her laugh was wheezy from disuse as she cackled at her joke.

I looked around wildly, wondering if other people could see me. Hayes was staring at the old woman in disgust, the vein in his temple throbbing.

The waitress was bearing down on the old lady. "Now, now, Mrs. Palermo. Go back to your table. The man doesn't want to be bothered."

"I'm not talking to the one in the fancy clothes," the old lady announced indignantly, disdaining Hayes. "I'm talking to him." She pointed right to me and I fought the urge to slide beneath the table.

Danny had returned and was staring at the old lady. “She’s nuts,” he said to the waitress. “She’s pointing at an empty table.”

“I can see that,” the waitress snapped at him.

“This young man deserves coffee and doughnuts, Elvira,” the old lady insisted, tapping my tabletop with her cane. “He’s had a hard night. I can tell just by looking at him. You bring him some coffee and doughnuts.” The old lady smiled at me. “I understand. I was married to a police officer once. He worked this very neighborhood.”

“Yeah?” Danny asked automatically. “What was his name? Maybe I knew him.”

“Sit down,” Hayes ordered abruptly. Danny sat.

“I’ll bring him a cup of coffee and a doughnut,” the waitress promised. “if you go back to your table and leave these nice men alone.”

The old lady looked Alan Hayes and Danny over. “Nice men?” she said. “I don’t think so.” She swiveled on her cane and hobbled away, but allowed the waitress to install her in a small booth near the front door.

To my surprise, the waitress returned with a cup of coffee and two jelly doughnuts. She sat them down on the table right in front of me. When I breathed in the heavenly aromas, I could remember exactly what they tasted like after a long shift, that first sip of fresh coffee, both bitter and smooth at the same time, that first bite of jelly doughnut when the powdery dough would split open in my mouth and the jelly inside would spill out over my taste buds.

Hayes and Danny were gaping at the waitress.

“You want her coming over here all night?” the waitress demanded. “Or do you want your privacy? Because if you want your privacy, a cup of coffee and two doughnuts sitting on an empty tabletop will not bother you.” She stood, hands on her hips, daring them to argue.

“Fine,” Hayes said, his voice as cold and stiff as steel. “Put it on my tab.”

I laughed while the waitress, almost gloating from her triumph, refilled their coffee and departed. But I stopped laughing at what Hayes said as soon as he and Danny were alone.

“Detective Bonaventura,” Hayes began, as if to remind Danny who he was. “You understand my viewpoint, I presume?”

“Hell, yeah,” Danny said. “That’s why I’m here. It’s an outrage.”

"It is indeed," Hayes agreed eagerly, making it seem as if Danny were setting the agenda. "To lose my daughter and then to watch as her killer goes free? How much can you ask a father to take?"

"I tried to tell them," Danny explained. "But wait until you get to be my age. People look right through you. They talk right around you. It's like you're not even there."

Tell it to the marines, buddy. Try being dead. And invisible.

Hayes, who probably was Danny's age and then some, but allowed himself to be overlooked by no one, nodded sympathetically at Danny's comment. "To whom do you attribute this misguided new investigation?" he asked. "Could they have a grudge against you or be threatened by you?"

"Oh, sure," Danny agreed eagerly. "It's Gonzales. He's commander now, but I knew him back when he was just a wetback kid from the projects who was too little to play football." Any authority this statement might have had was ruined when Danny glanced around nervously to see if anyone had overheard, his eyes lingering on a trio of muscled Mexican construction workers a few booths over.

"You have something on Gonzales then?" Hayes asked a little too eagerly.

"No, no, no, nothing like that." Danny folded his hands importantly on the table. "I just know what he's really like. One look and he knows that I know he's scared inside. He's not who he pretends to be, you know what I'm saying?"

Hayes, the master of not being who he pretended to be, nodded. "And the girl?" he asked, his voice lingering on the last word contemptuously.

"Ah, Maggie's okay," Danny said. "But she's kind of a legacy hack, you know what I mean?"

"Enlighten me," Hayes asked, perplexed. Oh, he was smooth.

"Her father was a cop and his father before him and on and on, so the department kind of had to hire her and now her way up the ladder is greased slicker than goose shit, whether she does the job or not."

Danny had always mangled his metaphors. I used to find it funny.

"And does she do the job?" Hayes asked. "Has she found out anything new about the case to make her think Daniels is innocent?"

"Who knows? She won't give me the time of day. Too stuck-up."

"What exactly is she doing?" Hayes asked.

Danny shrugged. "My guess is she does just enough to keep the brass off her back, like the rest of us. She's just shuffling papers. Thinks setting Daniels free makes her a hero. She might have something going on with Gonzalez on the side, though. He sure as hell seems to have a thing for her."

It was strange. I knew every word was nonsense. I knew it was the vile, drunken ramblings of an unhappy soul. And yet, a flash of jealousy rose in me at the thought of Gonzales and Maggie together. How quickly ugliness could take over your soul, I realized, against all reason and all vigilance.

"Is that so?" Hayes said, as if disinterested. But he had sensed a possible advantage and I could see his dark eyes glitter at the thought of having something to hold over Maggie and Gonzales.

Danny shrugged. "Could be. He's given the green light to get the Daniels kid out of prison. On what basis, I ask you?" Danny's voice rose. His indignation had been awakened. "That was a clean case. You know how hard me and my partner worked on it. We followed every rule, we crossed the i's and dotted our t's." He did not notice his mistake and Hayes did not correct him. "I mean, we looked into every possibility. Worked day and night. You know how it was. We felt your pain. We weren't going to rest until we found the killer. Now they're calling it all into question. All that work we did. It's bullshit is what it is."

"And now they're releasing Bobby Daniels from prison," Hayes said sadly.

Danny nodded. "He's going to get off scot-free. Probably get a zillion-dollar settlement to boot."

"Do you know when they're letting him go?" Hayes asked. His whole body stiffened and the vein in his temple bulged. We had come to the point of the charade, I realized. He wanted to know when and where to find Daniels.

Danny did not notice the change in Hayes. "Not yet. There's a lot of paperwork you got to do first." His tone was patronizing, as if Hayes could not possibly understand the intricacies of police work. Foolish, foolish Danny.

"But you will know when it happens?" Hayes emphasized the "you" as if Danny were the most important man in the department.

"Oh, sure," Danny said, sitting up straight. "I know everything."



“It’s so sad when the justice system fails like this,” Hayes said. His voice was somber, as if he were speaking of a great tragedy. “It’s just so wrong when the elaborate system we have constructed to bring about true justice fails and something unspeakable like this is allowed to occur.”

Danny nodded, distracted by his need for more sugar. Hayes fell silent when the waitress appeared to bring Danny a refill of cola. Sensing it irritated Hayes, she took longer than was necessary, then leaned over their table, across the wall divider, and pretended to refill my coffee cup.

Hayes glared at her.

The waitress shrugged. She was enjoying needling the affluent white man in his too-clean clothes. “She’s still here.” The waitress nodded toward the old lady beaming at us from her booth by the door. “Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

Hayes ignored her and she left, smiling to herself.

I was starting to like that Elvira.

“I can’t help but reflect on the flaws in the system when something like this happens,” Hayes said smoothly.

“Like what?” Danny asked, not really interested. He was eyeing the garishly topped pies circling endlessly in a glass display case near the cash register.

“Like loopholes. Like lawyers out to make a name for themselves. Like detectives who want to use their sex to get ahead without doing any of the real work. Like killers going free to satisfy people’s ambitions.”

His voice had taken on a harsh edge. It was a masterful performance.

Unless he truly meant it.

I wasn’t sure which scenario scared me the most.

“Life’s a bitch and then she dies,” Danny agreed.

“Do you know what I think?” Hayes asked, throwing his napkin on the table in disgust. “I think when something like this happens, good men have no choice but to take matters into their own hands.”

Danny looked blank. “What do you mean?”

“When good men stand by and do nothing, bad men prevail,” Hayes explained.

“You said that?” Danny looked confused. “It sounds like a famous saying or something.”

Hayes let a flicker of disgust cross his face, “Yes, someone famous said it. I can’t quite recall whom. But that is not the point.” He leaned closer to Danny. “The point is that good men cannot simply stand by when something like this happens. Good men take matters into their own hands.”

“Anything else?”

Danny and Hayes both jumped and I had to give the waitress credit. She had stepped on Hayes as thoroughly as a housewife crushing a cockroach to oblivion on her kitchen floor.

“I’m out of here,” she explained pleasantly. “You can pay the cashier.”

Hayes turned his head slowly to glare at her. The hatred in his dark eyes was naked and unmistakable.

She smiled back at him, as if not noticing his hostility, but her tone when she spoke held just enough of a victorious edge to zing Hayes one more time for the road. “Boyfriend’s picking me up in two minutes,” she explained. “This is my last shift ever here. And you’re my last customers ever here. I’m on to greener pastures. So don’t worry about a tip. You two were such good sports about Mrs. Palermo. She’s a regular, you know. We care about her.”

As she walked away, I felt a tidal wave of uncontrolled, entitled fury rise in Hayes, feed on its own power, and swell to a near-breaking point.

“Service in this place can get a little dicey,” Danny offered obliviously.

Hayes slid his black eyes to Danny and glared, but said nothing.

Danny looked uncomfortable. “I’d, uh, offer to get the check, but . . .”

“Of course not,” Hayes said, his control returning. “I invited you. I insist on picking up the tab, as they say.” When he reached for the bill, his long, tapered hands were as graceful as a pianist’s. His nails had been freshly manicured.

“What were you saying?” Danny asked. He wanted to be sure he’d earned his free meal, I thought wryly, remembering how much he loved his freebies.

“I was saying that we need to make sure that Bobby Daniels and that partner of yours don’t make a mockery of the justice system,” Hayes said. “I can only imagine Detective Gunn’s triumph should that happen. How powerful she will feel. Who does she think she is?” he asked. “Well, I’ll tell you. She thinks she gets to call the shots. She thinks she gets to come in late

to the game, then act as coach. She thinks she gets to make a fool out of you, to cast aspersions on your work. She thinks she gets to decide it all.”

Danny was staring at Hayes. “I never thought of it that way,” he said.

“Well, you should,” Hayes explained. “I offer the waitress as a case in point. Women spend their entire lives trying to tear men down. That’s what they’re wired to do. They’re weak and they’re helpless and they’re angry at us for being the stronger sex. So they spend their lives trying to destroy us.”

When Danny looked doubtful, Hayes stepped up the pressure. “Just look at your own life. I’m betting there’s a woman there somewhere. Someone who used you, took your money, enjoyed her own life without a thought to getting a job, then left you when things got tough and you needed her. She walked away and manipulated the courts and the system to bleed you dry. Am I right?”

Danny had grown still and his eyes were far away. A silence descended. I could hear the clock on the wall ticking. I could hear Danny’s heart beating. The air had grown thin and every object in the room seemed to appear in ultra-relief. My hearing became acute. I could understand conversations on the other side of the room, I could hear the clink of pans in the kitchen.

It was as if the entire universe was swirling around the eye of a hurricane, and I sat right in the middle of that eye, watching a man weigh his soul. His very salvation balanced on the edge of a razor and the rest of his life depended on what he now chose.

“Detective Bonaventura?” Hayes asked, his voice sounding kind. “I apologize sincerely. Did I hit a nerve?”

Danny shook his head as if to free himself from the past. “No. I was just thinking.” He looked up at Hayes. “I think I have a way to find out when Bobby Daniels gets released from prison.”

“Excellent.” When Hayes smiled, a darkness descended over me. Danny had chosen. Danny was lost. “Absolutely excellent.”

## Chapter 21



I spent the rest of the night outside the Hayes house, watching to see if he would go out in search of someone to take his frustrations out on. The next morning, I went in search of Danny, knowing that Alan Hayes would not hesitate to start using him. I had no success. He did not show up for work and I could not find him at any of the usual bars. I backtracked through my memory for every sorry dive we had ever sought refuge in and checked them out. No dice. And though he had been estranged from his family for years, I even stopped by the house where Danny's ex-wife and his son still lived. The yard was in disarray and the house looked neglected. I knew Barbara was working two jobs to keep her and Danny Jr. afloat. I guess some things just had to slide.

It made me sad to see the deterioration of the yard, a once-tidy lawn where we had sat on summer nights, grilling steaks and raising beers to the future, boasting about our latest successes in solving a case. Danny's life had slid into the bottle right before his divorce and drowned in it soon after. But I could not pinpoint exactly where it had all gone wrong for me, when my life had taken the last, irrevocable wrong turn. Somehow, when I was not looking, it just had. Perhaps that was just the way it was, that no one ever recognized a moment for what it was—and perhaps it was kinder that we were allowed to hold on to our illusions for just a little bit longer after the point of no return.

I know it had happened to Danny, too, that his life had slipped away from him when he wasn't looking and that he drank to stave off the realization that it was now too late to get it back—and that nothing would turn out as he had planned. But now? It was one thing to give up on your own life. It was another to destroy the lives of others because you were angry about your own. Oh, it was far worse. Nothing good would come of this. Nothing.

I watched the empty house for a few hours, remembering what had been. A woodpecker lived high in a tree next door and kept flying down to test the tin pipe that dangled from the overflowing gutters to the ground. With a *rat-tat-tat*, he'd probe the metal, fly off indignantly, only to return and try again. I could not decide whether I admired his perseverance or thought he was the stupidest damn bird I had ever seen.

Eventually, I gave up and wandered over to the apartment complex where Danny had rented a unit after his wife kicked him out. Though no one was home, baby paraphernalia and college books were scattered over every available surface of the four-room apartment, telling me that Danny had moved on and other tenants taken his place. I examined a terry-cloth duckling that a chubby fist had flung to the floor. The orange bill was frayed from where it had been gnawed on by tiny baby teeth. It pierced my heart. One of my sons had a duckling just like it when he was a baby. I remembered using it to scrub him in the tub at night. Yet I could not remember which son it had been. How was it possible to forget such an important thing as that?

Enough of the past. I had to keep my mind on the present. I had to keep my mind on the case. Maggie was in danger.

Why would Danny be so willing to hurt Maggie? Why would he be so willing to work with Alan Hayes? Surely it wasn't because of her rejection of his clumsy advances. The way Danny drank, the terrible care he took of his body—I don't think he had actually felt desire for anything but another shot of whiskey in years. And though his pride may have taken a hit, he lacked the energy to follow through on defending its honor. I was certain of that.

And did he really care about the Hayes case and being proved wrong? I was certain he had not cared about it even back when it was new. Why would he care about it now? What did he hope to gain? The past? Oh, Danny—to think you could return to the past and reclaim it in some way. Only someone who had given up on the present would ever think in such terms.

I thought back to the days when we had first investigated the murder of Alissa Hayes. Neither Danny nor I had been in good shape; we were both beginning our final slides into the bottle. Danny was still reeling from the breakup of his family, though it had happened a good five years before. And

I'd had my own excuse for drinking then, as well, though I could hardly remember the details. It was a promotion of some sort that I had coveted in the more sober recesses of my heart and not gotten. Of course, looking back, I was barely holding on to my present job at the time. There was no way anyone would ever have seriously considered me for more. But we have such power to delude ourselves and I had been deep into delusions back then.

With neither one of us sober or focused enough to work the Hayes case properly, we had simply followed the path of least resistance, one that had ended in an innocent man sitting in a jail cell. Yet, that was neither the first nor would it be the last case of injustice caused by incompetence, or even by our incompetence. It wasn't like Danny had intentionally steered us wrong or had anything to do with Alissa's death.

So why would he want to stop Maggie from doing her job?

I had no way to find Danny to ask him, no way to move forward in figuring out what it all meant. And so I returned to Maggie for the afternoon. She would have someone to watch over her.

Maggie was working furiously on a warrant application, entering paragraph after paragraph into the computer. A cold cup of coffee and forgotten salad sat unnoticed beside her as the hours passed. Occasionally, she would pick up the phone and speak to Peggy upstairs in the lab, double-checking the spelling of some of the more technical terms before entering them into her report.

By three o'clock she was ready to submit the report to Gonzales. She walked it upstairs herself. Seeing her approach, he waved her inside. I followed like an invisible puppy, watching the two of them intently, wondering if Danny's suspicions had been right, fearing they had something going on.

But Gonzales did not give her a second glance when he took the papers from her. There was nothing between them but professional respect. I was ashamed to have thought like Danny, even if for only a second.

Gonzales read through the application and the file beneath it quickly, frowning the entire time. When he was done, he stared at Maggie intently.

"What?" she asked defensively, her fatigue starting to show.

"Where's Bonaventura?" he asked. "He's AWOL and I'm pissed off about it. When's the last time you saw him?"

“Last night,” she said, still protecting Danny. She would not tell Gonzales about how Danny had barged in on her visit to the Hayes house. She would not betray the brotherhood, even if the brothers did not consider her fully one of their own. “We went out to dinner,” she explained. “I thought I might be able to get something out of him about the case.”

Gonzales looked skeptical.

“I know,” Maggie added. “It was stupid. He had nothing to give me. I’m not sure he even remembers the case. And he was plowed.”

“Did he try to put the moves on you?” Gonzales asked abruptly.

Maggie looked shocked.

“I’m asking for a reason, Gunn,” he reassured her. “I’ve had complaints about him from other women in the department.”

She shrugged it off. “It’s not anything I can’t handle.”

Gonzales shook his head, disgusted. “He’s a human train wreck and he’s not going to stop until he’s taken others down with him. But if I can him now, I lose the respect of one hundred and forty fellow officers.”

“Yes, sir. I understand.”

“So what did he have to say about the case?” Gonzales asked. “Did he happen to explain how they ended up putting the wrong man in jail?”

Maggie suppressed a smile at his sarcasm “No, sir. Basically, he tried to put the blame all on Fahey.”

“He would,” Gonzales said. “But don’t believe it. Fahey let the bottle get the best of him his last couple of years, but inside he still had something left. Did you know that he gave me a run for my money in the academy? He could have been a great cop. He could have been sitting here where I am if things had been just a little bit different.”

I felt a jolt of adrenaline, as I always did when I heard someone mention my name. It always made me realize anew that I had once been among them, living as one of them. It seemed a thousand lifetimes ago.

Gonzales tapped the file with a fingertip. “You’ve left some things out of this. Most requests like this summarize the first investigation more . . . critically, shall we say? They usually provide more evidence of sloppiness.”

Maggie shrugged. “Just trying to save you some trouble slogging through it all, sir.”

“How bad was it?” he asked. “Just tell me.”

“They were . . .” She hesitated and I loved her for it. “They were sloppy, sir.”

“How sloppy?”

“Very sloppy.”

“Who’s fault was it? Fahey or Bonaventura?”

“Sir, you’re asking me to judge a dead man.”

“Just tell me.”

“You’re right about Fahey. He was better on his end, but maybe moved too quickly with his suspicions. Bonaventura was supposed to take the family, but by the time he got around to it, the boyfriend was already in custody and both of them stopped looking into any other alternatives at all.”

“And you really think the girl’s father has something to do with this?”

“Sir, it’s not Bobby Daniels. He’s been in prison and the murders are identical. Alan Hayes is a common link between the two girls—I checked and he lied about not knowing Vicky Meeks. She monitored a class he taught last summer. Plus he is frequently around the kind of lapidary dust we found on both victims, he knows the areas well where both bodies were found, and besides all of that, something is very wrong in the Hayes house. You know that I can’t put a hunch in the report, but if you even walked in the front door, you’d know there was something wrong in that family. I promise you. At the very least, we need to look into it.”

“Anything in his past?” Gonzales asked.

“Nothing provable yet. But girls went missing from the three colleges where he taught before coming here. At the same time he was living in each area.”

“Statistically speaking?”

“Statistically speaking, at a rate well above what you would expect in a college town. And I’m still waiting on some jurisdictions to get back to me.”

“His employers?”

“It’s hard to get anything out of them. They’re afraid of lawsuits. But he’s bounced around a lot, been denied tenure twice, and left one college before the issue even came up. That’s a bit odd. I’m hoping someone outside human resources will crack and give me something off the record. I’m still working on it. I have a contact inside one chancellor’s office. If she gives the go-ahead, I’ll hear something next week. All I can get from them so far



is that it was a student complaint about unprofessional conduct that led to his leaving.”

“Okay then,” Gonzales conceded, having the sense to trust a good cop when he met one. “You’ve given me enough to push the search warrant through. O’Malley will approve it. It’s yours.” He looked up at her more kindly. “How’s your father doing?”

So he knew her personally after all.

“Better, sir. He gets out every now and then. That’s progress.”

“I was sorry to hear about your mother. That’s a tough way to go.”

Maggie looked away. “It was kind of you to come to the service.”

“Least I could do.” Gonzales sounded almost human. It was a side of him I had not seen in two decades. “My dress blues ought to be good for something.”

“It helped my father,” she said. “You being there.”

But Gonzales had used up his humanity allotment for the day and, to my relief, there was not even a smile exchanged between the two of them when they were done. He simply signed the request for a warrant, handed the file back to Maggie, and picked up the phone to call the judge.

By five o’clock, Maggie had her search warrant.

## Chapter 22



With warrant in hand, Maggie radiated an immense, intractable resolve that transcended consciousness. It was a determination to conquer her prey that extended back thousands of years, connecting her to her primal ancestors hunting for their survival. She no longer needed to kill to eat, but she still had the urge in her. I could feel it throbbing like a piano wire being plucked with a thumb. She had simply turned the compulsion to hunting a new kind of prey. Was this why she was so much better than I had ever been at her job?

She exuded a cold and terrible light about her when she was in this state. Nothing living would want to venture near her, and even I, beyond such things, felt a vague fear as I waited with her in her car, an unseen companion who craved her company as a way to chase all other thoughts from my overactive mind. Where had Danny gone? Had my old partner known more about who killed Alissa Hayes than he'd let on? Why had he disappeared?

Let it go, I told myself. Just let it go. Watch Maggie be Maggie and let it go.

Maggie had parked down a side street with a clear view of the Hayes front door. She was waiting for Alan Hayes to leave his home before she served her warrant. Backup was awaiting her instructions and, occasionally, she would update them via radio, always telling them to keep standing by. She knew his schedule by heart. He would be leaving for a faculty meeting soon. She'd approach once he left. His wife would be easier to deal with alone. Maggie was not as reckless as Danny and I had been. Today, she just wanted information. This was a preliminary search. She'd get Hayes for good later on.

The sun was setting with a spectacular fiery pulsing of reds and oranges in the western sky. Maggie did not give it a glance. Me? I sat in the backseat and stared as fingers of scarlet tinged with purple began to spread across the horizon, marveling at its beauty. I could feel the dying beauty of the earth around me acutely now that I was dead: the choking of the rivers, the poisons in the air. But sunset was one earthly glory that pollution enhanced. And enjoying it would not make anything worse.

It was, I realized, as terrible and as beautiful in its power as Maggie herself.

She waited. Finally, Alan Hayes left his house. She gave him ten minutes to come back for anything he might have forgotten. She then asked her backup for a five-minute head start and walked briskly to the front door, knowing exactly what she was going to say. A single uniformed officer emerged from a car across the street, ready to accompany her inside. Morty, her father's old friend. Morty, master of the notification and condolence call. Morty, a man I had underestimated.

"Ready?" he asked her in a low voice.

She nodded and rapped sharply on the door, then pounded when no one responded. Finally, the door opened a crack.

"Mrs. Hayes?" Without missing a beat or betraying her intentions, Maggie used her foot to gently but insistently push the door open wider.

"Yes?" Elena Hayes took a step back, confused. She did not seem to recognize Maggie from her prior visit. Her eyes were unfocused and the air about her felt sluggish, almost muddy.

Prescription drugs, I thought, a bad American habit to chase away bad Russian memories.

"I have a warrant to search your premises for items outlined in this document." Maggie thrust the papers at her. Elena Hayes stared at them dully. "It's mostly items from your husband's lab in the basement," Maggie explained. How had she known it was there? Was she guessing?

Elena Hayes blinked at Maggie. "Lab?" she repeated.

"His hobby room. Where he makes his jewelry." Maggie nodded toward the brightly colored bracelet encircling Elena's wrist. She was guessing.

"Oh, yes. His workshop. It's in the basement." Her words were slurred. "You know, I really should call Alan and let him know that you're here to —"

“No problem,” Maggie interrupted. “But we already tried to reach him ourselves. We called his office and cell. He seems to be at a faculty event right now.” Maggie took Elena Hayes by the elbow and guided her inside the house, as if willing the groggy woman to cooperate.

It worked. Elena Hayes led us into the house and to the basement steps. As we descended the stairs, I felt waves of despair rising around me, welcoming me into an embrace of lingering sadness. This, I thought, was like the first faint stirrings of Hell, the level before you descended down into eternal torment. This was where the pain rose, hovered, and spread out in a mushroom cloud of suffering. It was not a place where anyone with a spark of goodness would want to linger. It reminded me of the miasma that had hovered over Vicky Meeks’s body in the clearing a few days before and of the evil within the prison’s walls—but did that prove anything? I could not be sure. I did not understand my new ability to feel fully. I only knew that the vast, sterile basement I followed Maggie into was a receptacle for great sorrow.

It was as spotless as an operating room. Drywall had obviously been installed within the last few years and painted a blinding white. The ceiling was just as relentlessly bright and smooth. Inset fluorescent lights lent the surfaces a faintly greenish glow. Steel counters lined two walls and held a series of meticulously labeled white plastic storage drawers. Each drawer held a different kind of rock. There were hundreds of uncut gemstones and other rock samples, all organized into the appropriate drawers. Between sections of storage drawers stood various tumblers, cutters, and electric saws, with each piece of equipment stored precisely in its spot and protected with a plastic cover.

For a man into rocks, the workshop was strangely texture-free. Even the floor was smooth concrete, marred only by a central drain that gaped open in its center like the terrible dark eye of a Cyclops.

Maggie began to open drawers with a methodical efficiency. Gallon jugs of bleach were stored inside almost every cabinet door and the room reeked of chlorine and lemon-scented disinfectant. There would be no DNA here. Maggie would be lucky to find a fingerprint that belonged to the family, much less anything to tie Alan Hayes to Vicky Meeks.

But she tried. Two forensics specialists arrived, as did three plainclothes officers skilled at searching for evidence. They opened drawers, checked

cabinets, ran their fingers across the smooth drywall, but found nothing to interest them. After a few minutes, Elena Hayes drifted upstairs, leaving a whiff of alcohol behind as she stumbled past me on the stairs where I was sitting, watching the show. She was too wasted to care that her home had been invaded. When she did not return, I knew she'd lain down somewhere for a few hours of oblivion, watched over by Morty, who had been murmuring soothing words to her in Russian while the basement was searched. That Morty. He was far more useful than I'd ever been.

But what was Elena Hayes trying to escape with her pills and booze? Was it the past, or was it the sterile coldness of her house and her husband? Were there darker, more recent memories she hoped to evade? I did not know what it all might mean.

Maggie's energy did not flag, despite the lack of results. She had the team examine every groove in every piece of equipment they found, swabbing, scraping, and bagging diligently. There was little to find. Like the rest of the house, the basement was barren. Even the trap in the floor drain gleamed in the glare of Maggie's flashlight. She had the crew scrape samples from the sides anyway. All it would take was a few tiny bits of genetic material to link Alan Hayes to the death of Vicky Meeks.

Still, the entire, vast room looked as if it were freshly scoured every hour on the hour. I did not give it much hope.

I would have given up long ago, but Maggie did not seem discouraged. She was hunting evidence on a much smaller scale than I'd ever been able to see. She seemed elated at the minute traces of dust extracted from a polishing wheel tumbler. And a thin drawer set into the counter itself yielded a few more crumbs of unidentified rock residue, which Maggie triumphantly noted. When every counter and storage drawer had been harvested, she turned her attention to a white metal cabinet nestled in one corner. She had just opened one of its glass doors when a young voice said softly from a spot behind me on the basement steps: "You won't find anything in there. He's too careful for that."

I whirled around, astonished that any human being had been able to get so close without my noticing their presence.

Sarah Hayes sat a few steps above me, taking it all in. Her long coltish legs were folded up against her chest and she had wrapped her arms tightly

around her knees. She was as protected as a butterfly yet to emerge from its cocoon.

Maggie did not reply. She simply stepped to the foot of the stairs, looked right past me, and stared at the young girl on the steps above me, a questioning look on her face. I felt the wave of Maggie's empathy wash over me as surely as I had once felt the cooling power of the ocean douse the heat from my body as a child. The girl felt Maggie's understanding, too, and she pulled her legs in even more tightly against her body.

"Look behind it," Sarah Hayes said softly. I could barely catch the words.

"Behind the cabinet?" Maggie asked.

Sarah Hayes nodded and unfolded her limbs. She melted upstairs before Maggie could thank her.

My heart ached for them both.

Maggie did not waste time on sympathy. She was vibrating with an urgency that could not be derailed. "Help me," she ordered two of her men. Together, they inched the cabinet away from the wall, swinging it out on one leg in an arc that revealed a small door cut neatly into the drywall behind it. Its handle was inset and as white as the wall around it, making it nearly invisible even when in plain view.

I had a sudden flash of Sarah Hayes—who had learned to move silently through her life in order to survive—creeping down the basement steps, peering through the dark at her father, determined to know where the enemy was every moment of the day and night, watching while he accessed his secret cache, not knowing what was inside but knowing that, whatever it was, it was worth hiding and might, perhaps, one day save her from him.

Maggie examined the hiding place with her flashlight, pulled on a pair of fresh evidence gloves, and eased a plastic shoebox from the hiding place. She was careful to hold it by the lip as she gingerly carried it to a countertop and set it down for closer scrutiny.

"Let me do that," one of the men said as she started to pry it open.

"No, it's okay," Maggie assured him. "The sides are translucent. You can see inside, at least a little." They peered through the milky plastic sides of the box. "It looks like scarves, maybe? Socks. It's just . . . things."

The men stepped back anyway as Maggie pried the lid from the box and began to lift the stored items out, displaying them on the stainless-steel counter one by one: a purple bandanna, an ankle bracelet made of tiny

seashells, a lacy pink bra, a gold necklace with a heart-shaped locket dangling from it, a white cotton jogging bra, four pairs of panties, a diaphanous floral-print top, and an assortment of earrings.

“Could they belong to Alissa Hayes?” one of the men asked. “Maybe they’re mementos of his daughter?”

Maggie was frowning as she handled the garments, comparing the sizes and placing the earrings in one long row as she examined them carefully. She appeared not to have heard the question, but after a moment she looked up at the man who had asked it.

“They’re mementos all right.” She held up the panties. “But they’re not from his daughter. There are three different sizes here, from three different manufacturers.” She held up several of the earrings. “And these are not only completely different styles, two pair are for pierced ears, but these two aren’t.” She touched the two bras. “These are different sizes as well.”

The men stared at her, not understanding.

“They belonged to different girls,” Maggie explained.

No one said a word. They all understood. Alan Hayes was guilty. And Alissa Hayes and Vicky Meeks had not been the only girls to die at his hands.

Me? I already knew this to be true because they were all there, staring at me.

They’d appeared, one by one, as Maggie lifted the objects from the box, their figures arrayed against one of the bare walls as neatly as if they were in a police lineup: a row of battered, once-beautiful, young girls—now gone to the world, mourned by parents, by sisters, by brothers and friends.

I knew whose hands had taken them. Their presence in this room was proof enough for me.

There were eight of them in all, counting Alissa Hayes, who stood away from the group, staring at me with eyes I took to be full of gratitude because I did not want to think they reflected anything else. How many had died since her death, how many of those girls had died because of me?

The girls aligned behind Alissa were little more than shadows, tricks of light and darkness, a bending of the air to those who did not have eyes that could truly see. But they were there. They were all white and young, but of different heights, some thin and others athletic. All had long hair that hung like silk to their shoulders: that, I knew, was what had drawn him in. They

were dressed in clothes that ranged from simple skirts and blouses to hiking attire and even a pair of pajamas. Their limbs were pale and their faces half hidden by shadows, though I could see by their eyes that they were there to deliver a message: give our families peace so that they can let us go.

This was what Alan Hayes had wrought. The taking of lives not yet lived, the snuffing of beauty yet to unfold.

And all I could think of as I stared back at these otherworldly witnesses was that Maggie, my Maggie, was surely in danger. I didn't know what Alan Hayes was exactly: a human monster, something beyond human, an aberration that needed to be destroyed? I only knew that if he had been able to take such young and such lovely lives, again and again, without remorse or regret, and found pleasure in the taking of their innocence, that he would not hesitate to take Maggie. And he would find his own dark joy in destroying her.

I was filled with a foreboding. Alan Hayes was waiting, I thought to myself. He was not at a faculty dinner, blissfully unaware of her scrutiny and the invasion of his privacy. Not at all. He had known this day was coming, that it would have to come, and he already knew what his next move would be.

So did I.

He was somewhere patiently waiting for a chance to claim his ultimate victory. Waiting for his chance to claim Maggie.



## Chapter 23



Maggie, unaware or uncaring of any danger to herself, had taken one look at the contents of his trophy box and known she had to stop Alan Hayes now. She left the rest of her team to catalog the intimate items spread out across the counter and went upstairs in search of Morty. He was dozing in an armchair while Elena Hayes snored on the couch. But he woke the instant Maggie touched his arm. It was clear to me that Morty would have done anything she asked, but this time all she asked for was his advice. She told him what she had found in the secret cache below, and of Sarah Hayes having led her to it, and what she wanted to do next and how it presented her with a moral dilemma.

Morty did not hesitate. A coldness welled up in him, a vein of resolve and conviction that surprised me with its strength. “Do it,” he said to her. “I’ll take care of the mother. You just do what you need to do to get this guy.”

Maggie left the room, but I stayed with Morty, curious at the hard man he had suddenly become. He roused Elena Hayes from her drug sleep, shaking her shoulder roughly and barking at her in Russian. The woman struggled to sit up, heart hammering in terror at the sound of her native language. Some memories never die. She was so relieved to find herself in America, surrounded by the comforts she had clawed her way toward and suffered to retain, that she sank back against the couch and agreed to all Morty was proposing. By the time Maggie returned with Sarah Hayes, Morty had retrieved a tape recorder from his car and was ready to play his part.

He asked Elena Hayes first in Russian, and then in English, whether she was the legal guardian of Sarah Hayes. Having established her parental rights, he secured her permission to interview Sarah as a minor, again

confirming her consent on tape in both languages so there could be no question as to whether the woman understood what they were asking.

“Do you wish to be present while I interview your daughter?” Maggie asked. We all saw Sarah Hayes flinch at the question. She did not consider herself her stepmother’s daughter in any way. They were both the victims of Alan Hayes, I realized, but that did not make them allies.

The older woman’s composure faltered. She looked to Morty for advice.

“You may choose to be here, if you wish,” he said carefully. “Or, you may waive that right, perhaps out of respect for your stepdaughter’s desire for privacy.” As if he were merely stopping to check the speed of the tape, Morty halted the recorder and examined the spools carefully as he continued in a casual voice. “Of course, if you do not hear other people’s details, you cannot be called upon in court to testify to what you have learned.”

It was a mangling of the truth at best; she would not be called upon to say what she’d heard in any case. But to a woman leery of the authorities, he had offered her an out she was desperate to take.

“I will make us all tea,” she said. “Slowly. The Russian way.”

I could feel a layer of tension lift from Sarah Hayes as her stepmother left the room. The young girl was willing to reveal her shame to Maggie, and would tolerate Morty’s grandfatherly presence, but to share her shame with the woman who had surely known of it, and chosen to do nothing to stop it, would have been too much to ask.

After establishing that Sarah was talking to her voluntarily, Maggie began by getting the young girl to confirm on tape that she had been the one to tell Maggie where to find the hidden compartment in the wall. That Maggie. She was smart. There would be no question about the warrant’s parameters now.

“How did you know it was there?” Maggie asked her gently.

“Sometimes I watch him when he’s down there,” the girl whispered as Morty moved the tape recorder closer, trying to catch every word.

“Why?”

She hesitated. “I like to know where he is.”

Maggie let it go. That line of questioning was best left for the social worker whose job it would be to put the girl back together. Maggie’s job

was to stop a killer. "How many times have you seen him take the plastic box from its hiding place?" she asked Sarah instead.

"I don't know. Three or four times. But I think he does it every night. He spends a lot of time down there."

"Doing what?" Maggie asked.

She shrugged. "Making jewelry, I guess. It's his workshop."

"You're not wearing any jewelry," Maggie pointed out. "Yet your mother wears quite a lot."

"Stepmother," Sarah corrected her. "And I don't like his presents."

Maggie let it go again. "What does he do with the items in the box when he's downstairs?" she asked.

"He takes them out of the box," she said and hesitated. "He smells the things; he puts them up to his cheek and rubs his face." She stopped abruptly.

"What else does he do?" Maggie asked softly.

The girl flushed and shook her head furiously. I felt a darkness descend over her. She had willed herself not to remember. Maggie knew enough to back off.

"Does he ever take anyone down there with him?" Maggie asked. "Guests? Other people. Maybe a student?"

"He makes my stepmother go down with him sometimes to . . . do things. I don't watch then. Not ever." She stared at her bare feet intently.

"But no one else? You're sure?"

She nodded. "I don't sleep very well. I hear when people move through the house at night. I know when he's here. I know when he leaves. I can hear his footsteps. I can hear his voice. I keep a map of the house in my head." She stared at Maggie, willing her to understand. "So I know where he is all the time."

"I understand," Maggie said, taking the girl's hand and holding it gently. "Does he spend most of his time down there?"

She shook her head. "Not all of it. He likes to go out at night."

Maggie stiffened. "How often?"

She shrugged. "Three, maybe four times a week. Sometimes every night."

"When was the last time he did that?" Maggie asked.

“Last week,” Sarah said. “He was gone every night. Once he didn’t come home for breakfast. It was nice. Elena made me latkes. He doesn’t like them. He only eats one thing for breakfast, that crunchy hard cereal, and we’re not allowed to cook anything else in the mornings if he’s here. He says he doesn’t like the smell of cooking in the morning. It makes him nauseous.”

Maggie and Morty were looking at one another: last week. When Vicky Meeks had gone missing.

“Do you know where he goes when he’s not here?” Maggie asked the girl.

Sarah shook her head. “I don’t want to know,” she said.

“Have you ever been in the basement with him?” Maggie asked.

The girl turned scarlet and her hands folded automatically over her stomach.

“You can tell me,” Maggie whispered. She waited as the girl thought it over. As the silence built, I felt the room around me shift in temperature. The air grew cool. I smelled lilies. I felt a presence enter the room—and then Alissa Hayes was there with us. She had forced herself to enter the house. She had faced the lingering evil inside, to be at her little sister’s side.

She stood just behind Sarah Hayes, visible only to me, and placed a hand on her sister’s shoulder, lending her whatever strength she had to give. Sarah needed it. I could feel the fear in Sarah’s young mind, her yearning to be saved conflicting with her need to be safe, her desire to trust Maggie at odds with what she had learned about trusting other people in her life, her wanting to tell Maggie all about it at war with her certainty that some secrets had to be kept because they had the power to destroy you.

Alissa Hayes would not be enough to break through all that fear. I moved to Sarah’s side and placed my hand on her other shoulder, willing my strength to flow into her, trying to ease the turmoil inside her. I wanted to help. I needed to help. I had to right the terrible wrong I had made possible. And as I stood next to Sarah Hayes, willing myself to be an instrument of good, I believe that the first faint stirrings of my own salvation came into being. I felt connected to the child by a channel of pure, white light, by a chord of love so strong I cannot explain it except to say that it did not come from me, it only came through me, and in serving as its vessel, I had bound

us together forever. Did Alissa Hayes feel the power, too? Would the two of us be enough to save her sister?

I felt the young girl's fears and dark memories receding. I felt the flickering of courage rise in her, fueled by a faint glow of hope, dousing the power of past threats and allowing her to tap into the heroic strength I had learned that almost every human being possessed inside of them.

She would do it. She would tell. Or at least, show Maggie.

In the end, Sarah did not explain what had been done to her in the basement by her father, at least not in words. She lifted up the pajama top she was wearing and showed Maggie the neatly arrayed rows of parallel lines crisscrossing her stomach. The cuts looked as if they had been made just deep enough to scar, but not deep enough to cause her to bleed profusely. They were controlled, they were calculated—they were her father's way of marking her as his. They were not the fatal cuts the dead girls had suffered. But they were clearly made by the same hand.

"My stepmother has them, too," Sarah whispered to Maggie. "Only I think hers are all over her body. I think that's why she wears all that . . . fabric."

"I can take you to a place that's safe," Maggie promised as she examined the scars, knowing that while some were old enough to have healed, others were fresh. "I can take you there tonight, if you want. You can walk away and start a new life. You never have to come back here, not ever. You'll have to show what he did to you to a few other people, but I'll be there with you when you do. Do you think you can do that?"

The girl nodded, still staring intently at her feet.

"Do you want to go with me now?" Maggie asked more gently.

The girl nodded again.

"I'll come upstairs with you while you pack," Maggie told her. "We'll take everything you want to take. I won't let Elena stop you."

The girl looked up, alarmed, at the mention of her stepmother's name. "Elena will let me go with you, but she'll never leave herself," Sarah said with childish wisdom. "She's afraid to go. But if she stays here, he'll hurt her when he comes home. He'll punish her for my leaving."

Sarah Hayes looked to Morty for her salvation. She could not live with leaving, not if Elena's pain was her legacy.

“I’ll stay with your stepmother tonight,” Morty said, his hand unconsciously touching his gun. “I’ll stay here for as long as I need to. I promise. I’ll stay until they take him away.”

“When will that be?” she whispered.

“Soon,” Maggie promised. “Very soon. We will come to get him soon.”

Sarah Hayes looked away, hiding her tears of relief. And I understood that, though Elena Hayes had treated her as little more than a stranger, perhaps even as her competition for survival, this beautiful, beautiful young girl had not been able to simply walk away and leave her stepmother to a terrible fate. I knew then that she would be okay in the world. I knew that, whatever happened next, Sarah Hayes would survive.

Sarah’s sister knew it, too. When I looked up, Alissa Hayes had vanished. I would never see her again.

## Chapter 24



I have come to understand, in my brief otherworldly existence, that humans have the capacity to bind themselves to one another and that, in doing so, they can become so much more than they could ever be by themselves. I did not understand the dynamics fully, only enough to know that I had missed out on something powerful and profound by not opening my heart to others when I was alive. I first realized this a few months after my death. It was spring and this dead man's fancy had turned to love. So I took to standing in the park, grappling with my loneliness, watching lovers walk hand in hand and families playing on the lawn. I witnessed how love can strengthen, brighten, and sharpen the very core of our existence, changing it forever. I came to understand that love is a permanent strengthening of the spirit, a gift that lingered long after the love itself was gone.

Even so, I was moved that Alissa's love for her sister had driven her to put off the easing of her earthly pain so that she could warn me of the danger to Sarah. And I was moved by a more anonymous love I witnessed when Sarah was delivered into the care of strangers whose job it was to repair the damage done by those who used the need to love as a weapon against their own children.

The woman who welcomed Sarah into her foster home had seen it all before. Her heart was hidden beneath a veneer of efficiency, but only because it had been broken too many times to count by the stories she'd heard from the children who passed through her life. She remained a loving woman, despite the overwhelming evidence she'd seen of man's cruelty. She had felt Sarah's fear at once, understood her pain, and welcomed her into the safety of a temporary home. I knew Sarah would be okay in the sprawling, life-filled house crammed with toys and chaos. She could begin her new life here.

Maggie was reluctant to leave her. She waited with Sarah in the front room of the foster home until the social worker could arrive, asking gentle questions about the most ordinary of topics—school—in order to help Sarah create the illusion she would need to survive: the illusion that normalcy was possible.

It was close to midnight by the time Maggie left. As she drove through the dark streets, I felt her mind switch directions and she homed in on Alan Hayes. All empathy vanished and the kindness in her hardened to a nonnegotiable resolve to stop him. Oh, but she wanted to bring him down. I sat beside her, thinking of myself as a sort of spiritual co-pilot, rooting her fury on. Her mind never stopped trying to figure him out. She retrieved her cell phone from the depths of a knapsack tossed carelessly right in my lap and made a call, despite the lateness of the hour. When she started talking, I knew it was Morty.

“Is he back yet?” She frowned. “That means he’s on the run. He knows.” She was silent. “Could be. How about her? Is she awake?” She nodded in the darkness. “He could be wherever it is he’s been going at night. I’ll keep the two men outside until dawn and get Gonzales to authorize replacements.” She listened intently. “Are you sure? Okay, then. Let’s both get some sleep.”

Maggie would not get much sleep. The phone rang as soon as she laid it back down on the seat. This time, she pulled over to the curb to take the call, pressing a palm against her free ear to muffle all other sound. “I can’t hear you,” she said loudly. “Slow down and talk louder.” Her face strained with effort as she listened—and then she paled.

“Don’t let him leave, Roger,” she shouted into the phone. “Just tell him I’m on the way. And thanks. I owe you one.” She listened again. “Yes. I can do that. Favor made, favor repaid.”

She tossed her cell phone on the seat, flipped a switch on the dashboard, slammed her foot down on the gas pedal, and just like that, I was riding the lights at night again, watching the purple and blue beams sweep the traffic away from the road in front of us. God, it felt good. We flew through town, blowing through stoplights, leaving other cars in our dust. As she took the final turn out of town and headed down the blacktop, I knew where we were going: the Double Deuce bar on the outskirts of town. Why?



Before we reached the Double Deuce, Maggie switched off the blue light, not wanting to trigger a mass exodus. We glided into the parking lot in a spray of gravel. She cut the engine and was out the door in seconds, running toward a crowd clustered near the front entrance of the bar.

It was Bobby Daniels, the man I'd put in prison for the murder of Alissa Hayes. Somehow he had been released and ended up here at the Double Deuce, the last place on earth he should have gone.

I sat on top of her car for a better view. Bobby was lying on the ground, surrounded by onlookers, his back propped up against the brick building. Roger, the well-muscled owner and bartender of the Double Deuce, was holding a cloth to the side of Bobby's head. It was soaked with blood. The neon signs above them blinked pink and blue in a steady rhythm, rendering Bobby first a healthy pink, then a sickly blue, then pink and blue again.

The surrounding crowd was at least six people deep, each one shamelessly sipping from a beer as they enjoyed the Double Deuce's specialty show: watching blood flow. I scanned the faces in the crowd, looking for anyone I recognized. And an odd thing happened. Every now and then, I'd find someone staring back at me—face still, eyes unblinking, but their attention undeniably on me perched atop Maggie's car. Two were men and one was a woman. But my attention was diverted by a side scuffle that broke out and was quickly quelled, and when I tried to find the trio among the crowd again, all three were gone. They had vanished.

I thought of the way they had looked at me. I thought of the black shapes I could sometimes see out of the corner of my eye. And I decided they had been of my world, not of the living. Had they left disappointed that they were taking no one with them? I wondered if that meant Bobby Daniels would live.

I watched Maggie fight her way through the crowd to the front. "Let me through," she said impatiently, not wanting to pull rank. She wisely kept her badge in her pocket as she tossed aside bikers and women twice her size with a strength that impressed me. "Let me through. Coming through." She finally reached the front and knelt down beside Daniels. His face was covered with blood. "What's the story?" she asked Roger.

"He'll be fine," the bartender said. "It missed his eye and all major arteries, but it sure looks like that was what they were going for. It's a long

gash and it's on his face, so it's going to bleed a lot. Might need a stitch or two."

"No," Daniels croaked. "No hospitals. I don't want a record of this."

Roger did not ask why. "Might get by with some butterfly bandages. I can give you a handful. We got plenty behind the bar."

"Thanks," Maggie said, examining the slice that curved down the side of Bobby's face. It had been made by a very sharp and very thin blade. There were no hesitation marks or stabbing wounds. Someone had known what they were doing, they just hadn't gotten close enough to do it properly.

"I need you to keep this one off the books," Roger said. "One more call this month and I could lose my liquor license."

"Not a problem," Maggie assured him. "This definitely stays off the books."

I don't know who looked more relieved: Bobby Daniels or the bartender.

"Can anyone tell me what happened?" Maggie asked Roger.

The bartender rolled his eyes. "How many burnouts, goofballs, meth heads, and dusters do you have time for?"

Maggie surveyed the crowd. "As many as actually saw it happen."

"I can give it a shot," Roger promised as he rose to his feet. He raised his hands high and the crowd fell silent, as if waiting for a benediction. "Free drinks all night long for anyone who saw what happened and can help this officer out. But, if you're contradicted by anyone else and I find out you lied just to get free drinks, then you're eighty-sixed from here permanently. Got it?"

Roger had the wisdom of Solomon. His pronouncement presented most of the patrons, none of them anxious to talk to a cop, with a deep moral dilemma. I had to admire the bartender's ingenuity, though I figured most people would pass up the offer altogether. I was wrong.

"Well?" Roger asked. "Let's have it. If you want to stay outside and tell her what you heard, stay and talk. The rest of you, get the hell back inside so some do-gooder driving by doesn't call in more cops. I've told the girls to take off their tops for the next half hour."

That got them going. Most of the crowd stampeded back inside, but some stayed behind to talk to Maggie. I joined the line, curious to find out what they knew. It was a cross section of lowlifes, ranging from a toothless old man in sawdust-covered Levi's to a trio of bikers, two overweight women

who'd been rode hard and put away wet, one bleary-eyed older woman with frizzy hair who looked like she'd been drinking the last thirty years away, a skinny kid who seemed terrified at being where he was, but was determined to tough it out, and one decent-looking woman on the right side of thirty wearing a pair of tight jeans and a bikini top. She should have been shivering, but she looked like she'd just stepped off the bar top and had plenty of body heat worked up.

"Come on, Jeanna," the bartender said when he saw the young woman in the bikini top. "Get back inside. You're my moneymaker."

"No way," she said, snapping her gum at him. "I want to talk to her. It's important."

"You can send her back out after her next time up," Maggie told the bartender. "I'll talk to the others first and wait for her if I have to. And I'll tip her. You'll get your cut. I promise I'll make up for any time she loses."

"Deal. You can use those tables over there." He pointed to a pair of picnic tables in the side yard left over from way back when the Double Deuce had been a souvenir stand for tourists, before the new interstate had bled them all away. "The cold will sober people up and there's no way you'll hear a word inside. Unless you want to take these people into your car."

Maggie looked at the old man in filthy Levi's. "The tables are fine," she said.

Roger tossed the blood-soaked rag to Maggie and headed back inside, his dancer close behind. Maggie caught the towel and knelt next to Daniels, murmuring in his ear. "Listen to me, Bobby. I need to talk to these people first so we can get the hell out of here. I don't want you to listen because I need to hear your story straight from you. I can't have their versions affecting yours. But when they're done, I'm going to take you to where you're staying and I want you to tell me every single thing you can remember. You're going to be okay. I think we can get away with some butterfly bandages on that cut. Just sit tight, keep the rag pressed to your face, and start going over every minute of tonight. And don't worry about anyone finding out. I'm not telling anyone about this; I'm not reporting it back. It stays between you and me."

Bobby nodded, too overwhelmed to do more than obey. I wondered what it was like to leave the narrow confines of prison life, where everything was

prescribed, only to be tossed into the chaos of a place like the Double Deuce.

“Over here,” Maggie told the witnesses. “I’ll take you one by one.”

“Ah, man,” one of the bikers complained as he tugged on his ZZ Top beard. “This is gonna take all night.”

“If you’re at the back of the line, you can go inside and get your free drinks while you wait. Just come back,” Maggie told everyone. “And you two”—she pointed out the biker and his friend—“when you get back, I want you to stand on either side of the guy who was cut and make sure no one gets within twenty feet of him. There’s twenty bucks in it for each of you if you do.”

“Cool,” the friend said. “I can drink next to anyone for twenty bucks.”

When I died, my price had been hovering around five.

While most of the men in the group headed back in to start drinking on Roger’s dime, the old man with dusty Levi’s and the women stayed put. First up was the old guy and he got right to the point.

“Satan did it,” he told Maggie, sitting down and leaning toward her like they were the best of friends, enjoying a cup of coffee and swapping secrets.

“Satan?” asked Maggie calmly. She’d done this kind of thing before.

“Yup. Looked real sharp, too. Dark hair, nice clothes. Mean face though. I don’t care how pretty he was. He walked in, I saw him and I knew there would be trouble. It was Satan. I tell you that now to save you time.”

“Okay,” Maggie said. “I appreciate the heads-up. I’ll watch my back. Now go tell Roger you’ve earned your free beer.”

The old man smiled his toothless thanks and made room for the older woman with frizzy hair. Maggie took one look at her prematurely aged face, the swollen flesh and broken veins of her body, and sighed. She recognized the signs of a hard-core, cirrhosis-suffering alcoholic when she saw them.

“And what did you see?” Maggie asked. “Because the guy before you claims he saw Satan.”

“I didn’t see no Satan,” the woman said. “I saw a television guy.”

I had taken a seat next to Maggie and was enjoying watching her work. Unfortunately, that meant I caught a blast of horrific halitosis from the frizzy-haired woman. It was an occupational hazard of being on the job.

“A television guy?” Maggie asked. “You recognized him from TV?”

“Hell no,” the woman said. “That shit kills your brain. But he looked like a television guy. You know what I mean? Plastic hair? Phony smile? Clothes that look like someone ironed them right onto him?”

Hayes. She was describing Alan Hayes. I’d bet my tombstone on it.

I couldn’t tell if Maggie realized it or not. I don’t think she did.

“How tall was he?” she asked the woman.

“Way taller than me.” She cackled. Not a good combination with that frizzy hair of hers. Throw in a cauldron and she’d be ready for business.

Real police work again had made me giddy. I’d gotten a lot funnier in death, I decided. It was too bad there was no one around who could hear me.

“And you saw him attack that man?” Maggie nodded toward Bobby Daniels, who was sitting patiently while Roger applied a series of small butterfly bandages down the length of his gash. The bikers had done as Maggie asked and were flanking Daniels like a pair of stone lions guarding a library entrance.

“No,” the woman admitted. “I didn’t see him attack anyone. It’s just that he didn’t fit in. I mean, look at us.” She waved a hand boozily toward the others. “He didn’t fit and I think he had something to do with it. For one thing, do you see him here now?”

I thought she had a point. So did Maggie.

“Okay,” Maggie conceded. “I appreciate it. Tell Roger I said you earned your free drinks.”

The woman staggered off and a scared-looking kid took her place.

“You old enough to be here?” Maggie asked him bluntly.

“Oh, yes, ma’am,” he said, whipping out a wallet and producing a military ID. “I’m twenty-four years old. I just look young for my age. Always have.”

Maggie handed his ID back without even looking at it. “You on leave?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m shipping out tomorrow.”

“Better get good and drunk tonight then,” Maggie said.

The kid was surprised. It took him a moment to realize she was joking, and when he finally laughed, it made him look about twelve years old. I tried to get a feel of what his fate held in store for him, especially if he was headed for active duty. But all I could get from him was an image of two

older people, dressed for church, arms outstretched to hug him. Not a bad memory to take with you to bad places.

“What did you see?” Maggie asked him.

The kid blushed spectacularly, turning a tomato red all the way from the base of his neck to the tips of his ears. What a thing to live with.

“What is it?” Maggie asked him more kindly, seeing his distress.

“I got tossed,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“I got tossed.” He looked up at Maggie, ashamed. “You know, like dwarf tossing?”

“No, I don’t know,” Maggie said firmly.

“I was standing there, minding my own business, watching a real pretty girl dance on the bar, when someone picked me up by my waistband and the back of my pants and kind of threw me through the crowd. I hit some fellows sitting at the end of the bar and went down. That’s when about fifty people landed on top of me and I got dragged outside, and I can’t tell you much else.”

Maggie was staring at him. “You got *tossed*?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said emphatically. “And I don’t have to tell you how embarrassing that is.”

“No,” Maggie said. “You don’t. You have no idea who did it?”

He shook his head. “I reckon he was pretty big.”

Maggie did not correct him, although I am sure she was thinking the same thing I was: so far, just about every customer we’d seen, with the exception of the old man in Levi’s, could have tossed this kid across the room. Especially the women. But Maggie did not pursue the point. She was like a perfectly calibrated interrogation machine, and what was more: I could tell she liked it. I was getting a glimpse into the real Maggie at last. She liked being among these people.

“Okay,” Maggie said. “Thanks. Go on inside and have your drinks. And good luck tomorrow.” She hesitated, then took his hands and squeezed them. “Don’t be a hero. Just put your head down and get through it. It’ll pass.”

He looked at her a little strangely as he walked away to his fate.

I wondered if he’d ever come back.

Two over-the-hill and overweight biker chicks took his place. “We want to testify together,” they announced in unison.

“You’re not testifying,” Maggie explained patiently. “This is all off the record. I just need to know who started it and who came after that guy.”

“We still want to do it together,” one of them said.

“Okay by me.” Maggie waved at them to take a seat.

They sat side by side, illuminated by the neon lights. They were definitely old before their time and it was likely alcohol and smoking were the reasons why. But for a pair of women who’d been hanging out at a bar all night, they seemed pretty damn sober to me. They took turns telling their story, like that children’s game Connie used to play with the boys: one person would make up a sentence, then the next person would add their own and so on, no matter how absurd it got.

“That guy was sitting at the end of the bar,” the bottle blonde of the pair explained as she pointed out Bobby Daniels. “Minding his own business. Not saying anything.”

“We figure he was laying low on account of he’s right out of the joint,” the second woman said. “Anyone can tell. A couple of the working girls approached him, knowing that and all, but he just waved them off.”

“Might have gone gay inside,” the first woman confided to Maggie. “Happens to some of them.”

“That’s true,” her friend agreed. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Then this sweaty fat guy comes up,” the first woman said. “Sat next to him and you could tell they knew each other. But I can’t say they liked each other. It was like they had to talk to one another but neither one of them wanted to be there. Like what they really wanted to be was arguing, but there was too many people around.”

“I understand,” Maggie said. “What did this fat guy look like?”

“A loser,” the first woman offered.

“Like a really bad car salesman,” her friend explained. “One who hasn’t sold a car in, like, twenty years. Fat. Sweating. Losing his hair. Bad suit.”

“He had red hair,” the first woman offered.

“No, he didn’t. I have red hair,” her friend said, running her hands through it to prove it. It was nice hair, too. She took good care of it. “That guy had brown hair. What was left of it.”

“Okay, he had reddish brown hair,” the first one decided. “And he stunk of bad aftershave and way too much of it. Like we couldn’t smell the booze underneath it?”

Danny. Danny had been there, too.

“What happened next?”

“They were arguing,” the second woman explained. “Me and Tammy tried to get closer. You know. We were bored. There’s this new girl,” she explained, then stopped to make a face. “She was in line earlier to talk to you. Every time she climbs up on the bar, you’d think Miss America had arrived and decided to tear off her clothes and do lap dances. The men go wild and we’re invisible.”

“Yeah,” the first one agreed angrily. “And they throw all of *our* money at her. Because, let me tell you, we bring in steady paychecks, which is more than I can say for most of the men in this place.”

“And then?” Maggie asked firmly, leading them back to the point.

“They were sitting at the end of the bar, near the front door,” the first one explained. “I figured it was because the young guy had claustrophobia. You know, he didn’t like little spaces on account of just getting out of the joint.”

“That’s probably true,” the second woman said in admiration. “I didn’t get that far in thinking about it.”

“And?” Maggie asked less patiently.

The first woman was ready: “All of a sudden, someone shoves Tony into the two of them. I mean, he just comes flying out of the crowd and slams into them, and they topple over on Charley, and some girl he’s trying to pick up, and drinks are spilling everywhere, and Charley and Tony come up swinging, and before you know it, everyone has pushed out the front door and they’re rolling around in the parking lot, and the whole place empties out and you can’t see a thing, but people are hitting the dirt right and left and fists are flying.”

“Yeah,” the second woman added. “It was way better than the dancing.”

“How did he get cut?” Maggie asked, gesturing toward Bobby Daniels.

Both women shrugged. “That’s kind of the weird part,” the first woman said. “I mean, we were looking and we didn’t see nobody pull a knife. So whoever it was had to be quick. Now, I did see maybe a chain or two, but these guys got records. Most of ’em got two strikes against ’em. They’re not going to pull their weapons unless it’s serious.”



“Are Charley and Tony waiting to talk to me?” Maggie asked, nodding toward the two men standing on either side of Bobby Daniels.

“Tony is,” the second woman said. “Charley split with the girl he was hitting on as soon as Roger came out swinging a bat and broke up the fight.”

“Yeah,” the first woman agreed. “Charley’s a lover, not a fighter.”

Maggie suppressed a smile. “Okay,” she said. “Thanks, you guys. I appreciate how observant you are.”

“Yeah?” the first woman said eagerly. She looked at her friend. “Maybe you and me ought to be cops?” They were still laughing as they stumbled back inside, anxious to start drinking on someone else’s tab for a change.

None of these people had bothered Maggie. She was able to see beyond their rough exteriors and bad teeth and lack of money to the human beings beneath. She was able to find some sort of point in common with them, somehow, and they could feel it, and that was why they talked so easily to her. What a woman. I marveled at what I felt coming from her. She was calm and organized inside. She knew this was a distance game and that the starting pistol had just been fired. She was going to piece it all together before it came to an end, no matter how long it took and how many kooks she had to wade through to get to the truth.

She waved over Tony the biker. He was so big that the picnic table tipped to his side when he sat down and Maggie had to put out her hands for balance.

“Sorry, Officer,” he said in a low, rumbling voice as he settled in and slammed two big mugs of beer down on either side of him, like a modern-day Viking drinking his mead after a hard day’s worth of raping and pillaging. I took in his yellow-turning-to-white beard, the little pigtails he’d braided into the mass of it like a pirate, saw his big blue eyes, and recognized him: my friend from the other night, the one I’d hitched a ride into town with on his chopper.

“You’re Tony?” Maggie asked him carefully.

He nodded. “I don’t think last names are necessary, do you?”

“No, I don’t,” Maggie agreed. “You got shoved from behind, is that right?”

He nodded, drained one of the beers in a single series of gulps, wiped his hand on his beard, belched like rumbling thunder, and launched into his

story. “I was standing there admiring Jeanna—she’s like the best dancer they’ve had here in years and Roger only lets her get up there maybe once an hour, on account of it keeps the crowd hanging on and drinking while they wait.” He waited for Maggie to nod her understanding and continued. “So there’s Jeanna up on the bar, dancing away, and I’ve got a frosty one in my hand to cool things down.” He hoisted a beer mug in salute. “And all of a sudden some son of a bitch headbutts me from behind.”

“Headbutts you?” Maggie repeated.

“Yes, ma’am,” Tony said indignantly. “Had to be a head-butt. Cowardly, but true. I got headbutted from behind, and while I am a big man, as you can see, I can’t be expected to hold my own when attacked from behind like that.”

“No, of course not,” Maggie murmured, and she was smart enough not to tell the guy that she knew who had been tossed into him from behind. The poor kid had a shaky enough future in front of him as it was.

“I go flying forward, knock two guys off their stools, slam into Charley, who is not too friendly even on a good night, and drinks got spilled and all hell broke loose. Charley came up swinging at me, someone tried to crack a bar stool on my head, I got kicked in the nuts, and well, after that, things went a little red, you know what I’m saying?”

Maggie nodded.

“We all end up outside and everyone is jumping into it, and I just kept swinging until I notice that the guy over there”—he gestured toward Bobby Daniels—“is bleeding pretty bad. I helped Roger stop the fight after that. I mean, fun is fun, but I could see the dude had been cut with something serious. Not a beer bottle. A serious blade. Now, I know Roger, he’s a buddy of mine. Stuff happens like that at his place too often and they could shut it down. They’re looking to shut it down, believe you me.”

“Did you see who had the knife?”

He shook his head. “I was swinging first and looking second.” He hesitated and glanced at Bobby Daniels. “I know that guy’s fresh out. I know the look. But you got to tell his parole officer, he had nuthin’ to do with it. Really. He was just sitting there.”

Maggie seemed genuinely touched by his concern. “It’s okay. He’s not on parole. He’ll be all right.”

The biker nodded, satisfied.

“Anything else?” Maggie asked, sounding hopeful.

“Hell, yeah. But you better talk to Barney about that, and maybe you better fasten your holster before you do.” Tony popped a thumb over his shoulder. “He’s got something pretty damn interesting to share.”

“Thank you, Tony,” Maggie said as she handed him the twenty she had promised him for guarding Daniels. “You are a prince among men. Now go on and finish your guarding duties, then go get your money’s worth out of Roger. I want you to drain an entire keg for free.”

“Will do, ma’am,” he rose from the picnic table and Maggie went tilting backward. She grabbed the wooden edge to keep from falling off. “Care to join me in a beer when you’re done?” Tony asked as he tugged hopefully on one of his beard’s pigtails.

“I appreciate the offer,” Maggie said sincerely. “But I’ll be on the clock.”

“No problem,” Tony said magnanimously. “And if someone don’t cooperate, you just tell them Big Tony will kick their ass until they do.”

Maggie smiled. “Thank you, Tony. I appreciate that. Would you mind sending Barney over? Nicely?”

Tony’s idea of sending Barney over nicely was to nearly launch him in the air, but Barney did not seem to take of fense at Tony’s enthusiasm. He had something important to tell Maggie.

“It was a cop,” he said before he’d even sat down.

Maggie froze. A sadness filled her. I think she finally put it together with what the two biker chicks had told her and knew who he was going to name before he’d said a word. “A cop?” she asked quietly.

Barney held up a hand. “God as my witness. I know you aren’t going to want to believe me, but it was a cop.” He had a massive gut that was splitting the sides of his black leather vest and his bald head gleamed first pink and then blue in the neon glare.

“Who was a cop?” Maggie asked. “The man with the knife?”

“The dude who started it all.”

“Tell me from the beginning,” Maggie said. Her appreciation of the people she was questioning and their quirks had disappeared. She felt weary and resigned, truly sad to hear another officer had been involved. And not, I realized, the least bit doubtful. She believed the biker.

“I walked in the door a couple minutes before it all happened,” Barney explained. “It’s my momma’s birthday and we had a little party for her so I

got a late start. I was ready to catch up with my drinking and I'd heard about Jeanna."

"Yes, I've heard about Jeanna, too," Maggie said, her heart not really in it. But she was too good of a cop not to try and establish rapport.

"Well, then, you know she's worth laying down for a drink or two. I come in the door and there he is: the biggest son of a bitch I've ever met. Sitting right there at the bar, next to that poor guy." Barney nodded toward Daniels, who had closed his eyes and seemed to have fallen asleep.

"You recognized a police officer? When you walked in?" Maggie asked carefully. "With that guy?"

"Hell yeah, I did," Barney said. "Asshole planted an eight ball on me twelve years ago. I did hard time for it, too. Missed my boy growing up. They pinned a whole operation on me. I'll never forget his face."

"What's his name?" Maggie asked, though I think she already knew it.

Barney looked a little shamefaced. "I said I'd never forget his face. But as it so happens, his name does escape me."

"Describe him," Maggie asked.

"About five foot ten; maybe fifty pounds overweight; head the shape of a sixteen-pound bowling ball with ginger-colored hair kind of plastered over it so he can tell himself no one notices he's going bald; big, fat bulb of a nose from hitting the bottle; a sweaty face filled with freckles; bad suit the color of dog shit; smells like cheap-ass aftershave."

Maggie stared at him. So did I. He had just described Danny to a tee and there was no mistaking it. Danny was the one. And I knew he had probably planted the coke on good ole Barney twelve years before, too. That interested me almost as much as the fact that Danny had been at the Double Deuce an hour before. Because, while Danny and I had been sloppy and stupid and drunk and useless, we had never been dirty cops. At least I never had. I'd never planted a scrap of evidence in my life. That was the one thing I would not do, and I'd never known Danny to, either.

Now? I started thinking back to our drug busts, going over our cases. Danny could have been crooked the whole time. I may not have known him at all.

"Did you see anyone else you recognized?" Maggie asked. Her eyes were sad. She didn't want Danny to be a part of this.

Barney looked apologetic. “Just the usual assholes who jump into every fight that comes along.”

“Okay,” Maggie said. The news had made her tired. She handed Barney his twenty wearily and he took it, looking a little ashamed.

“I shouldn’t take this from you,” he said to her. “You’re okay.”

“No, you take it,” Maggie said. “Buy your son a present. You’ve been very helpful. Can you send Jeanna over?”

“Sure.” Barney brightened. “I’ll escort her here myself.”

“That won’t necessary,” Maggie told him with a tight smile. “She looks like she can make it on her own.”

Jeanna had obviously just finished her shift on the bar. She was covered with sweat, breathing hard and counting a wad of dollar bills as she sat down in front of Maggie. Up close, she wasn’t as quite a pretty as I—and everyone else, no doubt—had hoped. Her jittery movements, pinpoint eyes, and the strange, disjointed energy she gave off told me why. I had seen enough meth heads in my career to know one when I saw one. She might be the best thing standing at the Double Deuce right now, but it wouldn’t be long before she, too, was old before her time and the grayish cast to her skin grew worse. It made me sad. I was witnessing her last few months of glory, the final days of her beauty, and they would pass all too quickly before she became just another worn-out, washed-up woman sitting at the bar of the Double Deuce, hoping some man would be drunk enough to see her as beautiful.

I think she could see her future, too. She did not look Maggie in the eye the whole time she was interviewed.

“Here,” Maggie said, sliding two twenties over the table to her. “These are for you.” She slid another twenty toward her. “This is for Roger.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled, quickly pocketing the money in a slit in her low-slung jeans. She stuffed the wad of ones in a back pocket. She glanced at Maggie quickly before looking away. “I’ve got a kid and I need this gig.”

“I understand,” Maggie said and I think she truly did. “You make your money while you can.”

“Damn straight. I still got a few good years left in me.” Jeanna pulled out a box of Marlboros. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Go ahead,” Maggie said, noting the woman’s trembling hands.

Jeanna saw her looking. "It's not what you think," she explained, holding one hand out in front of her. "It's what I saw tonight that's scaring me."

"What did you see?" Maggie asked quietly.

Jeanna took a deep breath and picked a fleck of tobacco from one corner of her mouth. Her fingernails had been bitten to the quick. "You're just going to think I'm crazy," she said. "Or drunk. Or both."

"Try me."

Jeanna fixed her eyes on the neon signs blinking out their promises. "I've been dancing here for about a month. The money's real good and Roger keeps the creeps off. I mean, we pretend to be college girls who just got the urge to dance on the bar and take their clothes off for the marks, but the regulars know we're here all the time. I'm a professional, just like you."

Maggie didn't argue and Jeanna looked encouraged. "I dance maybe five, six times a night. Just for the tips. And all I do is dance. You know what I'm saying? I'm not one of the girls who starts working the minute she steps down from the bar."

"I know that," Maggie said, but then her voice grew surprisingly harsh. "But they all started out like you. You do understand that?"

Jeanna looked up at the sky. "Course I do. I'm not stupid."

"And there's no going back once you start," Maggie added.

Jeanna stared down at her hands before taking a deep drag on her cigarette, ignoring both Maggie's comments and the possibilities for her future. "I've seen a lot of creeps come in the Double D. I mean, face it, it's not the classiest of joints." Her laugh was bitter. "We get a lot of guys right out of the pen down the road, like that one." She nodded toward Bobby Daniels, asleep with his head against the bar wall. "I pegged him as soon as he walked in the door, even if he is nicer-looking than most. It's the bad haircuts that give them away, but it's also this look they have. Like the world's too much for them but they're not able to keep themselves from walking right into the middle of it anyway."

"What did you see tonight that scared you?" Maggie asked gently.

"There was this guy standing toward the back of the crowd. You know how it is. You start dancing and a bunch of guys gather and they're drinking, and then they want you to take something off so they start handing you bills, and they kind of crowd closer until Roger has to step in and make them behave."

“And this guy at the back of the crowd got too close?” Maggie asked.

Jeanna shook her head. “Just the opposite. Everything about him was just the opposite. He was too straight for this place, too well dressed.” She hesitated. “Too clean.”

“Can you describe him?”

“Sure. And that’s the scary part. He was standing in a dark corner at first, I think he wanted to be hidden a little, and I just figured he was some perv, you know, who needed a dark corner for what he was doing. Wouldn’t be the first time at the Double D.”

Ugh. Roger’s job had its drawbacks after all.

“But there’s this crazy kind of mini-searchlight that Roger turns on when you really get going, just to whip the crowd up and get the booze and money flowing. It turns in a circle, all through the bar.”

Maggie nodded. She’d seen it in action. So had I. It had always added a touch of surreal World War II escape-from-prison-camp atmosphere to my arrests when the spotlight was sweeping over me while I was handcuffing someone. But the crowd had loved it.

“So, I’m standing to one side of the bar, waiting for my time up, turning down guys that think I’m some kind of whore.” She cast another quick glance at Maggie, then looked back at the neon signs. “And I notice that every time this searchlight scans the room, it sort of freezes on this guy, just for a couple of seconds, before it moves on. And he can’t hardly move, you know, because he’s wedged in between a lot of hollering fools, and I don’t think he likes that this spotlight is stopping on him, but it’s all preprogrammed and no one really notices anyway and I don’t think there’s much he can do about it. The guy’s real tall, did I say that yet?”

Maggie shook her head.

“Well, he was. Real tall. So I can see his face and I noticed that he’s staring at Becky and Nan kind of funny.”

“Becky and Nan?” Maggie asked.

“They go on before me. Roger puts them both up there at the same time, hoping to draw a bigger crowd. They do this rubbing up against each other and pouring tequila on each other stuff. It’s kind of lame, I mean, take a good look at them. Would you really want to see either one of them naked, much less both of them at the same time? But I guess late at night, with

everyone drunk, and the lights kind of low and those spotlights flashing around, well, people can make them into anyone they want them to be.”

She was smarter than she looked, I decided. I hoped she was smart enough to get out while she could.

“And this man?” Maggie prompted.

“It was the way he was staring at them that got me. I mean, I am halfway across the room but I can’t stop staring at him because even from there I can see his eyes. They were mean. They were really dark. Black, mean, hate-filled eyes, and he was just staring at them on the bar, and his whole face was real still, frozen, and real creepy and white each time that spotlight stopped on him, and he was just staring at Becky and Nan and I knew what he was thinking.” She paused. “He wanted to hurt them bad. He hated them. He didn’t even know them and I could tell he hated them. He looked mean and hungry and like he wanted to pull out a blade and start cutting them up into ribbons.”

She stopped, her voice quavering, and took a drag on her cigarette, inhaling deeply and holding the smoke in. I wondered how she knew what a man looked like when he was in the mood to cut. I figured she probably danced here so she could wear those low-slung jeans most of the time. They’d hide a lot of scars. But I didn’t question her authority. I knew she’d seen that look in men before.

“What happened then?” Maggie asked.

“It was my turn to dance. Roger puts me up there alone on account of I like to dance all over and, well, people like my dancing.”

“So I’ve heard a few times tonight,” Maggie said with a smile. She wanted the woman to keep on talking. Or maybe she was just being nice. She didn’t have the need to tear down others like most people did. I think she liked being kind to them. I think it made her feel better about all the ugly things she had to see.

Jeanna smiled back at Maggie, and for just an instant I got a glimpse of what Jeanna must have been like before she started taking off her clothes and dancing on top of a bar for a crowd of drunks. An image flashed through my mind: Jeanna, young, strong, healthy, tanned, dark hair blowing behind her as she stood at the prow of a powerboat, skimming the surface of an indigo lake, the sun shining bright above her. She was younger, happier, filled with hope.



How had she ended up here?

“I go up and start doing my thing,” she told Maggie. “But I couldn’t get that guy out of my mind. I was worried about Becky and Nan. They got bad judgment about men.” She laughed at the irony of her words, but it was not a humorous laugh. “I thought, oh, lord, what if one of them goes out into the parking lot with that man? They will not come back.”

She looked up at Maggie, her face frightened. “But he didn’t leave. He just stood there in that corner, staring at me with so much hatred I could feel it across an entire room. I could feel it across a hundred bodies. I could feel it washing over me each time that spotlight hit him.” She shivered. “I couldn’t take my mind off of it. I knew he was bad, and I knew he was looking at me and trying to decide where to cut me first.”

She was talking faster now and I wondered how much the speed had to do with what she had experienced and how much it was just that she had recognized Alan Hayes for what he was, when so many others had been fooled.

“Did he have something to do with the fight?” Maggie asked her.

“I can’t be sure. I didn’t see it start. First thing I know, there was trouble and chairs were flying and glass was breaking and I had to hop down behind the bar before I got hurt, and then people were rolling out the front door and the whole place emptied, and Roger was madder than hell and started outside with a baseball bat.”

“Did you see the man again?” Maggie asked.

The dancer shook her head and looked around her into the darkness. “I think I’m always going to see his face, though. In my nightmares. I get them a lot, you know. Nightmares.” She shivered. “I will tell you this. He may not have started that fight, but he had something to do with it. As soon as I saw him, I knew it—I knew that something real bad was going to happen.”

Maggie had put it together. Bobby Daniels. Danny. Alan Hayes. Their lives had all crossed paths at the Double Deuce. She didn’t know what they were trying to do, but she knew they had all been at the bar. Now she would question Daniels and maybe find out why.

“Here,” she said, sliding another twenty across the picnic table. “For the babysitter. And you make sure you get two guys to walk you to your car

tonight.” She handed her one of her business cards. “Will you promise to call me if you ever see that man again?”

“Sure,” Jeanna said as she stared at the twenty in wonder. “You make a lot as a police officer?”

Maggie laughed. “Not as much as you.” Her smile disappeared. “The future’s a lot brighter, though.”

“What are you talking about?” Jeanna asked. “You could be shot dead at any time.”

Maggie didn’t want to say it—but she said it anyway. “I’ve still got a better chance at having a future than you do, at least if you keep on working here.”

Jeanna took her money and left.

## Chapter 25



“Are you okay?” Maggie asked as she helped Bobby Daniels stand upright.

“I don’t think I can do this,” he mumbled. “It’s too much.” He wasn’t talking about his injuries, he was talking about the world. “There’s just so much noise and so many people.”

“You can do it,” Maggie told him. “And you’re going to. But it’s going to feel like that for a long time to come.”

“It’s just so much,” Bobby said. “All coming at me. And I don’t have anything left. What am I going to do? Go back to school? Get a job? Who will hire me?”

“You’ll figure it out,” Maggie promised him. “Let’s just go to my car and we’ll talk.” She led him to her car and I followed, scanning the parking lot as I went. Unease was infiltrating my consciousness with a growing urgency. It felt as if we were being watched and that something—or someone—was waiting for us in the shadows.

While Maggie helped Daniels into the front seat of her car, I walked up and down the rows of vehicles in the lot, checking for anyone hiding nearby. I saw no one. And yet, I could feel a heart beating in the darkness, steady, controlled, and hungry. And I could sense wariness as well as cunning and anger. The feeling grew stronger when I reached the back row and saw a black SUV pull out onto the blacktop. It accelerated and sped back toward town.

I stared after the taillights, fearing for Maggie. Alan Hayes was losing it. His anger was winning over his self-control. If he zeroed in on Maggie, if he started to blame her for events not going as he planned, he would focus all of his rapacious need to hurt on her. She would become the point person for his hatred and each time he was thwarted, his hatred would grow.

Was there nothing I could do? I returned to her car, wanting only to be near her. She was sitting behind the wheel, gently questioning Bobby Daniels. "When did they release you?" she asked.

"This afternoon. I thought it was going to be tomorrow. That's the first time my parents could get a flight in, but a call came in late this afternoon. They said they wanted to avoid a lot of publicity and television cameras, so they brought me to court, and when the judge said I was free to go, I just . . ." His voice broke. "I couldn't go back to that place, not even for a night."

"Of course not," Maggie said.

"I was going to get a motel room but there was a man in court, he runs a halfway house. He said I could stay there tonight. Off the books, as a favor. He said there was plenty of room and it felt right to me. It was a halfway house. The men there would know how I felt. And I thought maybe, if I got freaked, he could talk me down, or at least understand."

Maggie nodded. "How did you end up here?"

"I was checking out my room when the guy running the house got a call and he gave me a message. He said the detective investigating the reopened case needed to talk to me and wanted to meet me here. I thought it was you, so I came."

"You didn't think it odd that someone knew you were at the halfway house?"

"Plenty of people saw me in court talking to the guy who runs it. If they knew who he was, they'd know where I was headed."

"How did you get here?"

"I called a cab. It cost me thirty bucks, but I figured I owed you at least that much."

"You don't owe me anything, Bobby," Maggie told him. "Don't ever think that."

He looked down at his feet. He'd been living in a quid pro quo world for a long time. It would take some getting used to a world where people did the right thing just because it was right.

"I didn't even know you were getting out today," Maggie explained. "I would have been there to meet you, if I'd known."

"I'll be okay," Daniels insisted, unconsciously running his fingers down his gash. "My parents will be here soon. They're taking me back to Kansas City."

“Good,” said Maggie. “After tonight, you need to get as far away from here as you can. You know that, right?”

Bobby nodded. “Listen, I’m going to tell them that I got this cut before I got released, okay? I don’t want them to worry. They’ve done enough of that.”

“Sure,” Maggie agreed. “I’ll go along with that. But tell me what happened after you got here.”

“As soon as I walked in the door, Detective Bonaventura came up to me. I knew then it wasn’t going to end well. I knew I was in trouble.”

“What made you think you were in trouble?” Maggie asked.

“For one thing, he wasn’t you. And when I asked where you were, he said you’d been taken off the case and he was back on it, in charge.”

Maggie was silent. I knew what she was thinking: Danny would only have told Bobby that if he planned to kill him. It was too easily disproved as a lie.

“What did he want from you?” she asked.

“I don’t really know. That was the weird part. I wanted to leave right away. I mean, he was the bastard who put me away in the first place, and if he’d done even a halfway decent job, he’d have known it wasn’t me who killed Alissa.”

“Why didn’t you just walk out?”

“He said that the new theory was that Alissa’s father had killed her and he needed my help. He said he needed to know everything I’d told the police about her father, especially what I’d told you. I asked him why he didn’t just ask you and he said you’d left the files a mess and walked out on the department, because you wanted to get all the credit for solving it and were mad he’d been put in charge, so he was practically starting over.”

Maggie’s jaw clenched at this, but she said nothing. That Danny. He always found a way to squander any goodwill directed toward him.

Bobby Daniels looked apologetic. “I guess I believed him. Sort of. I didn’t know what else to think.”

“So what did you tell him?”

“That you hadn’t even asked me about Alissa’s father.”

“What did he say?”

“He wanted to know what you’d asked me about and . . .” His voice trailed off.

“What?” she prodded him.

“He wanted to know if you had talked about his old partner, the detective who died.”

Startled at being made part of the story, I leaned forward so I could hear better.

“Fahey?” Maggie asked. “Why would he ask you about Detective Fahey?”

“I don’t know,” Daniels said. “But he wanted to know if you had said anything about him.”

Maggie was shaking her head. “Did you tell him anything?”

“I had nothing to tell. I don’t think he believed me when I said you’d only come to tell me that you were trying to get me released. But it was the truth, and I wasn’t going to lie, and when he didn’t believe me, I started to get pissed off. I mean, I’d come all the way out here, spent thirty bucks I didn’t have on a cab, and now this guy didn’t believe what I told him. I started to remember what a bully he’d been, how he hadn’t believed me before and I’d ended up in prison because of it.” He closed his eyes. “So I told him to leave me alone. All I wanted to do was have a few drinks and head back to the halfway house and wait for my parents to get me the hell out of here. I wanted to be left alone.”

“Was that when the fight started?”

“Almost. I went to the bathroom first, and when I came back, he was in a really bad mood, like I had done something to piss him off. We got into it a little and the next thing you know someone knocked us over and I can’t even begin to tell you what happened next.”

“Do you remember when you were cut?”

Daniels nodded. “It was before we ended up outside.”

“Before?” Maggie. “Are you sure?”

He nodded again. “Positive. I went down and fists started flying and I sort of got shoved to the other side of the door into this recess. Just as two bikers slugging it out slammed into me, I felt a sting on the side of my face. It didn’t even hurt when it happened, but it sure as hell started to hurt afterward. Blood started pouring down my face and got in my eyes and all over my hands, but I got shoved out the doors with everyone else a second later and caught in the middle of a whole bunch of punching and shoving,

and I didn't have time to do much more than cover up and hope for the best before the guy with the baseball bat broke it up."

"So you never saw who cut you?" Maggie asked.

Daniels shook his head. "All I know is that it wasn't Detective Bonaventura. He was still back near the bar, and anyway, he's not fast enough to have done it. He looks like he's in pretty bad shape right now." He paused, fighting the bitterness. "I hope his conscience is eating him alive."

"I wouldn't count on it," Maggie said grimly.

"You think someone was in on it with him? That the fight was started deliberately?"

Maggie nodded. "When people get declared innocent and freed from prison, there are always a few kooks who disagree," she said. "And you never know what they're going to do. Detective Bonaventura is angry. He still thinks you did it. And he found someone who apparently agreed with him." She did not tell him that Alan Hayes was probably the man who had tried to kill him. It would only be throwing fuel on a fire and throwing even more uncertainty into a perilous situation. Who knew how Daniels might react?

"Did you see anyone else you recognized tonight?" she asked. It was as close as she would get to mentioning Hayes.

Daniels leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "No. It was too crowded. I spaced out a lot. I don't think I can make it out here. I'm just not used to it. It's too much."

"You'll make it," Maggie said firmly. "We just have to get you through tonight. Let me take you back to the halfway house." She hesitated. "Unless you'd rather stay somewhere else? My dad would put you up. He's a retired police officer. I could ask him."

"No," Daniels said, "The halfway house is fine. Nobody knows me and nobody cares who I am. It's locked down at night and wait until you see the guy who runs it. I'll be safe there."

"Okay," Maggie agreed. "But I need to talk with that guy. Just to be sure. I want to know who called him and told him to send you out here."

Daniels suddenly looked stricken. "My bag," he said, sounding panicked. "I left it at the bar."

"Your bag?"

“It’s got everything I own in it. Everything that helped me make it through the last five years.” He put his head in his hands. “I know someone stole it. It was all I had.”

“Don’t borrow trouble,” Maggie told him. “You stay here and I’ll check the bar. Lock the door behind me and don’t open it for anyone. I’ve got the key.”

She climbed out of the car and Daniels spent the five minutes it took Maggie to return with his eyes closed, sleeping or pretending he was somewhere else. Or maybe he was praying. When a man owns little more than a bag full of possessions, I imagine it hurts to lose that bag.

“Got it,” Maggie said triumphantly as she tossed a duffel bag into his lap. “It was shoved against the bar, near the front door. I don’t think anyone even saw it. Too busy looking at Jeanna, I guess.”

Bobby had unzipped the duffel bag and was pawing through it. “It looks like everything is here.” He took out a couple of pairs of pants, some shirts, a few biology textbooks, a Bible, and some photographs. “It seems untouched—” His voice froze. “What the—”

“What is it?” Maggie asked, hearing the alarm in his voice.

“This isn’t mine.” Bobby took out a ball of yellow fabric wadded up in one corner of his bag and began to unfold it. It was a yellow sundress. It looked familiar. I could not remember why.

“What do you mean?” Maggie asked.

“I’ve never seen this—” He stopped abruptly, as if the words had caught in his throat. “Oh, god. Oh, god.” He dropped the dress as if it were on fire.

“What is it?” Maggie asked sharply. “Bobby, you have to tell me.”

“This is Alissa’s dress,” he told Maggie. “The one she was wearing when she disappeared. I’m sure of it. She wore it the last time we went out together. This is Alissa’s dress. What is it doing in my bag?”

Maggie stared at the yellow sundress, trying to piece it all together. “The file never says they found the dress.”

“Why would anyone put it in here?” he asked her.

“Are you sure it’s her dress?” Maggie asked.

“How could I forget something like that?” He held the dress up to his face, inhaled its smell, and looked disappointed. “It’s been washed.” He looked ashamed, as if wanting to catch Alissa’s scent one more time, somehow, made him guilty of her murder after all.



But Maggie did not even notice. I knew she was thinking the same thing I was: someone had planted the dress in Bobby's duffel bag in a clumsy attempt to make it seem as if he was Alissa's killer after all. It was ludicrous to think someone could have kept the dress all those years, in prison yet, without detection. So there would be other planted evidence, a locker key maybe, stuck in a pocket of his bag, that led to more planted evidence elsewhere, maybe in a bus station locker or storage unit. Some place where Bobby Daniels could have stored his trophies all these years until the day he got out.

"Let me have the bag," Maggie said. A thrill ran through me. Maggie had put it all together, too. She and I were starting to think as one.

Daniels handed her the duffel bag, and she began running her fingers around the edge of the inside bottom and checking the zippered pockets. "Got it." She produced a small brass key.

"I don't know what that is," Bobby said, panicked.

"It's okay. I believe you. Just take a deep breath."

"How did you know it would be there?" Bobby asked.

Maggie sounded surprised. "I don't really know. I just thought of it."

"What's it for?"

"I don't know that, either." Maggie stared at the key. "Don't tell anyone about this, Bobby. You got it? First I'm going to find out what it's for."

"Are you sure?" he asked her.

"I'm sure," she said.

She was thinking the same thing I was—that someone had tried to frame Bobby and they'd wanted the fake evidence to be found with his body after they had killed him.

It was the kind of stupid, obvious plan that only a drunk like Danny could have dreamed up and thought he would get away with. But the only one who could have had access to Alissa's yellow sundress was her real killer. Which meant Hayes had been in on it with Danny—and that he had killed Alissa and was probably planning to kill Danny, too.

I wondered who really would have been implicated in Alissa's death. Hayes could just as easily have been setting Danny up.

*Oh, Danny, I thought. You are in way over your head. How could you have agreed to help Alan Hayes? Didn't you realize what that dress meant?*

"I don't get it," Daniels said quietly. "What did I ever do to anyone?"

Maggie started the car and pulled away from the Double Deuce. “You just got in someone’s way,” she explained quietly. “That’s all you ever did. And we need to make sure you stay out of their way from here on out.” She glanced at Bobby. “I’m going to take the dress. Tell no one about it. And I want you to lock yourself in your room tonight.”

He evaded her eyes. “I’ll be okay. I’ve learned how to take care of myself pretty good. At least when I know someone is coming for me.”

## Chapter 26



It was deep into the night by the time Maggie delivered Bobby Daniels back to the halfway house and decided for herself that the supervisor knew nothing about the plan to kill Bobby Daniels. She knew him from way back, it turned out, and he was appalled at the injury to Bobby, embarrassed at being tricked, and relieved when he learned Maggie intended to keep the whole thing quiet.

All he could offer was that the caller had been a man. "I should have known better," he said. "I've had people try all sorts of scams. Calling up pretending to be parole officers. You name it. But Daniels is a free man. Why would anyone pull a stunt like that?"

"Don't worry about it," Maggie told him. "Can you just check on him tonight, take a look at that cut in the morning, and make sure he's delivered to his parents in one piece?"

"You bet I can. He'll be safe with me."

I believed him. The guy was close to six and a half feet tall and well muscled. Bobby would be safe under his care, especially now.

Maggie made a phone call as soon as she returned to her car, despite the lateness of the hour. "It's me. I'm only a few minutes away." She paused. "Thanks. I'll be right over."

So, I thought, she has a lover after all. And though sexual desire had disappeared, apparently the desire for possession had not. I felt a stab of jealousy and brooded all the way to a house on the edge of a middle-class neighborhood. I recognized the block. I had once been called out there to chronicle the death of a young boy who had been hit by an ice-cream truck.

My god, had Danny and I really joked about that one? Danny had said to me in the car afterward, "If you're a kid, that's the way to go. It's like me getting hit by an Old Crow delivery truck!" And I had actually laughed.

How had I been so lost?

Maggie sat in the front seat of her car for a moment after we reached the house, collecting the odds and ends of her life that were strewn about and storing them in her backpack. Lights blinked on inside the home, the porch light revealing an overgrown lawn and neglected flower beds.

Perhaps this was not a lover's house after all. It seemed oddly dated, as if it belonged to a simpler time when marriages were rock solid, public schools were safe, and mosquito trucks crawled down the streets at dusk, leaving clouds of insecticide in their wake for the children of the neighborhood to romp in.

I had grown up on a block just like it.

An old man in a wheelchair opened the door before Maggie could knock, greeting her with a hug that lingered—he knew what she had been through.

“The lawn needs mowing,” Maggie told him. “I can do it this weekend.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” the old man said as he made room for Maggie to enter. “Come in and tell me all about it.”

“It’s bad, Dad,” she said as they entered a small living room. Maggie threw herself down on the overstuffed couch as her father positioned himself a few feet away. It was a ritual they had performed many times, I could tell. This was Maggie’s home. He was her family.

She led him through the events of the night and he listened with the wary attention of a former cop, seldom interrupting, usually a step ahead, understanding the implications of every development.

“The daughter doesn’t know where Hayes is going when he disappears at night?” he asked when Maggie was done explaining about the search of the Hayes home and what they had found.

Maggie rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms as she shook her head. “She has no idea. It could be anywhere. And I think that’s where he took the girls he killed.” She looked up at her father. “Where he *is* taking them.”

“You’ll get him,” her father said firmly. “If anyone can get him, you will. Just don’t move too soon, my Maggie May. Make sure you have him locked down tight before you bring him in.”

“I know. I know. Patience and thoroughness. It’s worth it in the end.”

“That and ‘don’t borrow trouble.’ ”

“Yes, I know. I’ve already used that one tonight, thank you very much.”

They smiled at each other, not needing to say aloud the things that passed between them. Theirs was a lifelong bond. I could feel the tension in Maggie lifting, I could feel her faith in life being renewed. But I also felt a shared sadness between them, a painful memory they both worked to block out. The father had come to terms with it more than Maggie. He carried the sadness inside him with grace and dignity. But for her, the wound was still raw and insurmountable, so deep she could not confront it even in memory. I did not know what it was, but I knew it was part of what made Maggie so aloof when it came to other people.

She told her father about the rest of the evening and he was not surprised to hear what had happened to Bobby Daniels at the Double Deuce. But he didn't want to believe Danny was working with Hayes.

"A lot of the guys don't take kindly to being second-guessed," he told Maggie. "They can do crazy things when they are. You remember what happened to Frankie Z back in '76? They let those two rapists out of prison because of a new witness and he went to his grave swearing everyone had been suckered but him. It was all he could talk about for twenty-three more years. Maybe Bonaventura had nothing to do with the slashing. Maybe he just went too far trying to prove he was right about Daniels. And you don't know it's the same yellow sundress Alissa Hayes was wearing when she died. It could just be a copy. A clumsy attempt to make Daniels look guilty."

Maggie was shaking her head. She didn't buy it. "You know he's dirty, Dad. He was there with Hayes. He has to be working with him."

Her father sighed. "He may be dirty. He probably is dirty, Maggie. I always had a feeling about him. And I know some other fellows in IA looked into Bonaventura and his partner more than once."

*They had?* I had never known, or even suspected, it.

"What did they find?" Maggie asked, sounding more interested in what her father had to say.

"Nothing. They came up empty-handed."

"So Fahey was a good cop?" she asked. It thrilled me to hear my name coming from her lips.

"I don't know that I'd say he was a *good* cop."

Ouch.

"I think he was a clean cop, though," the old man conceded.

“What was he like?” Maggie asked her father. “Tell me about him.”

“What’s Fahey got to do with anything?” her father demanded. “He’s dead, Maggie. Stick to the living.”

I got the feeling he wasn’t just talking about me.

“He’s got nothing to do with it,” Maggie admitted. “I can’t explain it. Peggy showed me his photo. I just felt . . . I don’t know. Connected to him. Like he would have wanted me to find out the truth.” She looked up at her father. “Kind of pathetic when you have to turn to dead guys for moral support, I guess.”

*I beg your pardon, I thought. I think you’d be hard-pressed to find a better partner than me.*

“You have plenty of people who love and support you, Maggie,” her father said. “You just need to reach out to them. They’ll be there if you do.”

I was angry at him for steering the conversation away from me. I wanted to hear more about what Maggie thought of me. But her mind was back on Danny.

“If Bonaventura wasn’t working with Hayes to kill Daniels, what the hell was he doing at the Double Deuce?” she asked her father. “He could have planted that evidence on Daniels a lot more easily somewhere else.”

“If Hayes is as smart as you say, maybe he’s using Bonaventura.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe Hayes wanted people to know Bonaventura planted the evidence. Maybe that’s why he proposed such a clumsy approach. Maybe the real person Hayes planned to kill and take the fall for the murder was Bonaventura.”

Good man, I thought to myself. I could see where Maggie got her abilities as a cop. Age had only made the old man smarter.

Maggie was staring at her father intently.

“What?” he asked.

“Sometimes you scare me, Dad,” she said. She kissed him on the forehead. “I’m glad you’re one of the good guys.”

He patted his wheelchair. “No chance of switching sides now.”

“How are you doing anyway?” Maggie asked. “I didn’t get a chance to call you much this week.”

He shrugged. “You know how it is. A little of this. A little of that. I’m drowning in casseroles from that Fitzpatrick woman.”

Maggie laughed. "I'm telling you, she wants to marry you."

Her father looked disgusted. "Your mother's not been in her grave a year. Do you really think I want to hook up with someone new?"

"Hook up?" Maggie started to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't think 'hook up' means what it used to mean," Maggie patted his knee. "But whatever you decide to do, it's okay with me."

"I could say the same to you." Her father chided as he wheeled to a cabinet nearby and poured them both glasses of whiskey. He handed one to Maggie and they clicked their glasses in an automatic salute.

"I don't have time for being involved," Maggie said. "You may as well give up that dream of grandchildren."

"That's not what Mrs. Millard says," her father teased her.

"Mrs. Millard?" Maggie stared at her old man. I could feel her hackles rising. "You said you were going to tell her to stop spying on me. I mean, really, Dad—come on. I got enough troubles without that woman watching every move I make. When I'm home, I like my privacy. She needs to mind her own business."

"Don't go poppin' your cork, Maggie May. I just asked her to keep an eye on you. I haven't trusted that partner of yours in days, since before he showed up at the Double Deuce. I figure he's going to come after you and make you look bad, maybe plant something in your apartment or locker. I want you to keep your eyes open. You don't understand how resentful the old-timers can get when a woman comes in and makes them look bad. Even when the woman is you. And Bonaventura is old school."

"What exactly did Mrs. Millard see?" Maggie asked skeptically.

"She saw your boyfriend leaving your house at a time of night when respectable men do not leave their girlfriends' houses."

Maggie stiffened. "Are you sure?"

Her father's voice faltered. He knew that something was wrong. "Yes, I'm sure. She called me this morning. It was last night about this time. Two A.M."

"I wasn't home, Dad. I was working. What exactly did she see?"

"I don't know. A guy leaving your house. She said he seemed to have a key. He locked the door behind him."

"Didn't Mrs. Millard think it was odd my car wasn't there?"

“I don’t think she looked for it. It’s not like she’s trained in surveillance.” Her father’s voice took on an edge. “What’s going on, Maggie?”

“I have to go,” Maggie said abruptly.

“You’re not going anywhere,” her father answered in a tone of surprising authority. “Sit down.”

Maggie sat. I was astonished.

“This is bad, Dad. It could be him. It could be Alan Hayes. In my home.”

“It could be anyone. It could be Internal Affairs. It could be that scumbag ex of yours. It could be Bonaventura, trying to find out what you have on him or trying to plant something on you. We just need to think it through.”

“What do I do?” Maggie asked, her voice faltering.

“Nothing tonight,” her father said firmly. “You’re staying right where you are and getting some rest. I’ll get the blankets. You look exhausted and you’re not going back to your house alone in the dark. Both of us are smarter than that.”

“I didn’t even notice,” Maggie said, horrified. “I spent a couple hours there this morning and didn’t notice anything different.”

“We’ll talk about it in the daylight,” her father told her.

Maggie lay down on the couch, weariness overtaking her, unable to resist the comfort and safety of her childhood home. I think she was asleep before her father had even wheeled out of the room. He returned in a few minutes with a blanket and placed it lovingly over his daughter, tucking the ends in around her shoulders with the tenderness of a lifetime.

And then he did something extraordinary.

As his daughter slept through the remaining hours of the night, he sat in the front hallway, staring out a side window at the dark streets of his neighborhood, a gun across his lap, his attention never wavering unless it was to look over and check that his daughter was safe.

The night wore on, the hours wore on. And still the old man did not break his vigil. He kept watch while Maggie slept. And I kept watch beside him.



## Chapter 27



I needed to know who had been in Maggie's house. It was all I could do to help the old man keep watch, and if not for my fear that Hayes had followed her to her father's house, I would have rushed off at once to see what I could find. Instead I waited until dawn. It finally came, bathing the world in a reassuring light, chasing away night fears and lulling Maggie's father into long-delayed sleep. He was snoring gently, gun still in his lap, when she tiptoed past him and slipped out the front door. I followed, knowing she was headed home. Her determination radiated off her: she would find evidence of whoever had been in her home.

Me? I'd find evidence of a different sort.

She stopped by a local cafe for coffee and I breathed in its aroma as she sipped it in her car. What joy it gave me, that simple pleasure coupled with the remembrance of what she had said the night before: we were connected.

How I longed to be sitting beside her as her real partner, sipping my own cup of coffee, getting ready for the morning with her. If only Danny had died instead of me, what a partner I could have made for Maggie. Oh, how she would have redeemed me and given me the strength to turn my life around before it was too late. And wasn't that what love was all about? The belief that another person could fix you, make you whole, fill in the missing pieces of your life? An illusion, perhaps, but one impossible to resist.

In return, I would have kept her safe. I wanted to do that now, even though the futility of my vigilance was obvious. I scrutinized every car we passed on the road—there were few this early—keeping an eye out for a black SUV or Danny's clunker. I saw nothing but ordinary people leading ordinary lives on an ordinary morning in an ordinary town.

And yet, a killer thrived among them.

We reached her house. It was a nondescript condo, chosen, I was sure, because it freed her from responsibility for yard work or maintenance. She shared the building with another unit, but its occupants were still asleep. And no wonder. The sun had barely started its climb into the sky. The newness of the day was filled with such promise.

Maggie's thoughts were darker. She examined the brass around the locks on her front door and ran her fingers over tiny chips in the doorjamb's paint. Unlocking the door slowly, with barely a sound, she drew her gun and held it out in the defensive position, then slowly eased the front door open with her foot. She entered, gun drawn, moving quickly from room to room, ready to fire. I don't think she took a breath for two minutes. After checking each of the six rooms and all of her closets, she double-checked that the front door had been bolted behind her and, finally, relaxed. Stripping down to her jeans and a pale blue bra, she began a more thorough search of her house, checking drawers, running her hands over bookcases, hoping to find a clue that might tell her who had broken in or what was missing. A spot on the top shelf of a cabinet in the dining area interested her. There, a small dust-free rectangle of oak gleamed where something had once stood. She ran her fingers over it, looked perplexed, then continued her search.

Me? I did not need to search to know who had been there. It was Danny. His odors lingered, no more real than memories to the living, but discernible by me: stale sweat, stale alcohol, and a dark emotion that snaked through the air in pencil-thin currents. It wasn't evil, like the essence poisoning the Hayes house, but something sadder, something that weighed even more heavily on my soul.

I crossed a patch of it and it came to me: fear so persistent it had taken on a life of its own. Danny had come here out of an overwhelming, desperate fear.

*What was he so afraid of?*

As Maggie scrutinized every surface in her house—it was as Spartan as a hotel room, devoid of distractions and excess possessions—I followed close behind her, running my hands over pillows, touching chairs, the couch, tables, doorknobs, anything I could reach as I tried to decipher Danny's intentions.

Why was he so frightened of Maggie? What could she do to him? What did he fear she might find out? I focused my memory on the original

investigation into the murder of Alissa Hayes, searching for some action by Danny that had been out of character. I could remember nothing out of the ordinary, just that he had been deep in the throes of an alcoholic haze by then and growing angrier at the world by the moment.

In the end, neither Maggie nor I had any luck with our search. All I knew was that Danny had been there. All Maggie knew was that her home was not safe.

As she showered, bathroom door wide open and her gun within reach on a counter nearby, I waited in her living room, trying to figure out a way to let her know that it was Danny who had been in her house. Not Hayes, but Danny.

The only thing I could think of was to activate thoughts of Danny in her mind. I concentrated on recent memories: Danny at dinner with her, Danny standing too close to her desk, Danny looking over her shoulder to see what she was reading. I was trying to inspire some spark of intuition on her part.

It worked. She was barely dry from her shower and still wrapped in a towel—her amazing biceps on magnificent display—when she abruptly stopped brushing her hair to call a colleague in records and ask for Danny's current home address. She jotted it down on a pad by the telephone and I scrutinized it while I waited for her to dress.

My god, Danny really was going down in the world. If that really was his latest address, he'd moved into the warehouse district where the local whores openly plied their trade. That was not a good sign at all. You only lived in that neighborhood if you had to—or if you were trying to prove to yourself that you didn't deserve anything better.

I could have been there in minutes, but I waited to ride along with Maggie. I wanted to pretend to be her partner for a little while longer. I had such few indulgences left. I could feel her resolve wavering as she drove down the wide, deserted block of Danny's neighborhood, gray and grimy in the bright morning light. Her detective's eyes missed nothing. The sidewalk was littered with used condoms, cigarette butts, and blobs of spit hocked up the night before. Oddly enough, they quivered and glittered in the new sunlight like beautiful jewels scattered across the bleak concrete.

It was a Sunday morning, so the block was empty and businesses shut down. There was no sign of Danny's old Bel Air parked anywhere, but I knew his habits. He could easily have been dumped out on the sidewalk in

the wee hours of the night by a Good Samaritan fellow alcoholic who'd held it together enough to give him a lift home. He could be here somewhere.

Danny's address matched a ratty first-floor apartment crammed in between a warehouse and discount tire store. I don't think Maggie believed he lived there. She figured it must be a fake address. She sat in her car, frowning at the front door, unwilling to believe that even Danny might settle for such a place.

Me? I knew Danny wallowed in seediness and embraced his misery, that he had long felt it was his due. And I also knew Danny had been there recently. A familiar strand of fear hovered around the apartment's front door. I followed it inside like a dog on a scent trail, leaving Maggie behind in her car, waiting for a sign that he was home.

My heart sank at what I saw. It was a hovel, even for Danny. What little furniture there was had long since been buried beneath old newspapers, fast-food wrappers, and dirty clothing. Unwashed dishes were scattered over every surface of the kitchen, the bits of food unrecognizable as anything more than dark clumps clinging to plastic. The refrigerator held nothing but an outdated carton of milk, now soured, and an open can of beans encrusted with a moldy surface as deeply grooved as a brain. Unwashed dishes filled a sink half filled with gray water and the air reeked of rotting food, filth, sweat, and a rubbery odor from the tire store next door.

If ever there was a place where a man who had given up on life could crawl inside and die—this was it. How had Danny ever let it get this bad? Why had he let it get this bad? No wonder he'd been ripe for the picking by Alan Hayes.

I found a copy of our old case file on the Alissa Hayes murder scattered haphazardly over the living floor, as if he had swept it off the cluttered coffee table in frustration. An upended cardboard box next to his bed yielded copies of more case files, mostly drug murders we had failed to solve and some drug cases I remembered solely because they had started out as big busts and ended up as black marks on our records, thrown out or lost in court because Danny had failed to follow some procedure or I'd been trapped by a defense attorney unable to recall something in our notes. It had happened more than once. I could have done without the reminder.

The bed was stripped of all linen, exposing the stained mattress beneath, and the sheets lay tumbled in a wad on the floor. The smell in the bedroom was even worse than the rest of the apartment: the bathroom that adjoined it had not been cleaned in months. Did he crawl drunkenly into bed like a dog each night, pull a sheet over him, and sleep drenched in sweat, breathing in the odors of urine and vomit? Why bother to get up in the morning if things were this bad?

And then I saw a framed photograph on a cheap table by his bed that almost broke my heart. At first I thought it was a photograph of his son. It showed a young man dressed in too-big swim trunks caught in mid-leap as he hurled himself off the cliff of an abandoned rock quarry toward the teal blue water below. It had been taken with a telephoto lens by a doting parent and the young boy's face was caught perfectly in an expression halfway between ecstasy and terror—a combination, I thought, that perfectly captured what courage was all about. And that's when I realized it was Danny in the photograph. He had told me about that moment many times, about the first time he'd been able to take his older brother up on his frequent dare to make the leap off the quarry's highest cliff. How proud he had been to take that jump at last, and in front of his parents and sisters, too. It was the best moment of his entire life, I realized, as I stared at the expression on a face I had never truly known, because that face had already grown weary with disappointment and self-sabotage by the time we met in the academy.

It scared me. How could he sleep in this hovel with the proof of what he had squandered so close at hand? It reminded me of how capricious life could be.

But what I found inside Danny's closet scared me even more—because it was all about me. There, thrown haphazardly on a cheap folding TV table, I discovered myself in a dozen different poses, through all stages of adult life, my fall from youth to middle age and, finally, death, chronicled in color and black-and-white. There were photographs of me aligned across every inch of its surface, as a man might align his cards when playing solitaire. There I was with Danny, clinking beers in toast, surrounded by the tiny patch of verdant grass of his old yard. There I was with my kids at a local pool. One photo showed Connie and me on our wedding day, Danny among the groomsmen, looking uncomfortable but cheery in his tuxedo.

Newspaper clippings of my death were neatly stacked in one corner of the table, near a red candle placed inside a tall glass tube decorated with a painting of the Virgin Mary. The candle had burned halfway down before the flame had flickered out. It was the kind of candle now sold in every corner store in America, a tradition brought up from Mexico to honor the dead and ward off evil spirits.

The closet was a shrine—an altar to my memory.

Why? Danny and I had been partners for most of our careers only because we'd had to be. Our friendship had been the first things to go when we'd embraced alcohol and hangovers and weariness and shame in our lives, neither one of us much caring, both of us knowing that there was no real friendship to lose anyway. Tethered together as partners, we'd endured our last years with little emotion and no devotion. Certainly nothing to warrant this kind of display.

What could it all mean—and what would Maggie think if she saw it? I could not see it with a stranger's eyes. It was impossible to shake my certainty that Danny had been indifferent to me in life or my skepticism that he had mourned me after death. But would she see it as a sign of his loyalty instead? Would she feel more kindly toward him?

Or would she see what I now saw, as clearly as I could see the disintegration of my life in the photos before me: either Danny's mind was going or Danny felt guilty about something.

## Chapter 28



Maggie was still sitting outside Danny's apartment in her car, watching for a sign that he might be inside. She was using the time to make phone calls and had worked her way up to Gonzales, judging by the tone of her voice.

"No, sir. He's not at home and he didn't show up for work yet." She was silent. "I am well aware of that." She hesitated. "Sir, we have a problem. He may be interfering with the Hayes case. I think he's trying to prove I'm wrong about Daniels being innocent." She flushed and took a deep breath. Was she actually going to lie to Gonzales? She did: "Nothing major. But he's been contacting witnesses. It worries me." She never told him about the Double Deuce, but she was thinking about the night before. "By the way, sir, I thought Bobby Daniels was getting out today. They tell me he was released yesterday afternoon . . . Yes, I understand. But was there anyone there to lend him support? I would have been glad to be there." She frowned. "I'm well aware of the consequences. That's why I keep out of the limelight."

I don't think Gonzales got the jab. She sighed and filled him in on Alan Hayes. "He's not come home, either. The wife claims she has no idea where he is. We may need to keep teams on his house around the clock. I don't think he will come home, though." She hesitated. "I think he has another place somewhere else. We're processing the evidence now. We may find something that leads us to him."

Gonzales was obviously issuing a string of commands on what to do about Alan Hayes next, but he had angered Maggie with his excuses for not letting her know when Daniels would be released—the clipped way she promised to keep tracking Hayes showed it. As soon as she hung up, she called Peggy in the crime lab.

“Peggy? It’s Maggie. I’ve got a heads-up for you. Gonzales may come poking around. He wants a smoking gun so he can stage the press conference to end all press conferences.” She laughed at something Peggy said, then asked, “Any luck?” She looked disappointed. “I know. Sorry to add to the pressure. Did Danny show up for work yet?” She paused. “Didn’t think he would. I can’t just sit around. I’m going to go question the daughter again. She may know something and not realize it. Call me if you find anything.”

As she drove toward the foster home where she had dropped Sarah Hayes off the night before, I could tell Maggie felt her window of opportunity to find Alan Hayes slipping away from her. She was determined to use every waking moment to locate him. And as dangerous as he was, I wondered if Maggie wasn’t equally as dangerous in her own way—at least to him.

Hayes wondered, too. Within a few miles, I spotted his car. It was not yet noon. With most of the town still in church, the roads were relatively empty. Hayes was hanging back a block and trying to hide behind a red truck headed in our direction, but it was impossible for him to conceal himself completely. When we hit a straightaway, the road widened, then curved, giving me an unmistakable view of his SUV as he sped up to keep pace with Maggie. I could not see inside the SUV, but it was the same model and the same shiny black finish. It darted from lane to lane, clearing other cars like a shark slicing through a school of smaller fish.

It could have been someone else, of course, but when I saw it again, turning into the road ahead of us, after taking a parallel road to pass us first, I knew it was Hayes. He turned right soon after, away from us, but before long he had pulled back in behind us. Maggie was being careful. She checked the rearview mirrors frequently, but Hayes knew how to follow without being detected. You’d have to really be looking to spot him.

I guess he’d had a lot of practice.

Maggie led him straight to the house where his daughter was staying.

My only consolation was that the daylight revealed what I had missed the night before: this was more than a foster home. This was a safe house for kids whose parents had been deemed a danger to their children. An eight-foot-tall link fence of commercial-grade chain enclosed the backyard. Hayes would not be able to spy on Sarah from the rear of the house, at least not without risking being seen by someone as he climbed over that fence.



Maggie rang the doorbell. A redheaded boy who looked to be about eight years old opened it immediately. He was breathing hard and his face was creased with a smile—we had interrupted his fun.

“Ask who it is first!” a voice reminded the boy from another room.

The little redheaded guy, with the door wide open, inquired, “May I ask who you are before I unlock the door?”

Maggie suppressed her smile and showed him her badge.

“Maggie.” Sarah Hayes stepped out from behind a doorway, face flushed. Four smaller children, all of them under age five, were hanging off her arms and legs. “Sandy went to the grocery store to get more milk. I’m babysitting.”

She was a new girl. One day and she was becoming a whole new person. The resilience of children is breathtaking, I thought to myself. Would that we could keep that ability as adults. I could tell Sarah was proud of being able to help out. The expression on her face finally fit her age.

“Again!” one of the smaller children squealed and began tugging on her arm. Sarah was pulled under by a sea of squirming bodies. She was wrestling four little children at once—and giving them a run for their money.

Maggie watched, smiling, until the kids had pinned Sarah to the floor. They jumped around the room in triumph as she scrambled to her feet, face flushed, and adjusted her long ponytail. “They’re hard to beat,” she told Maggie.

“I can tell. But you hold your own.”

Sarah smiled at this, but it reminded her of something else far less happy. Her eyes lingered on the front door, then she walked over to it and locked the four deadbolts that ran up and down its edge. One more than she’d on her old bedroom door. I guess they got a lot of kids like Sarah in the house, kids who understood the need for multiple locks and felt better seeing them there.

“Sandy has a key,” she explained to Maggie. “She should be home in about fifteen minutes. Want to go out back?”

Maggie nodded and Sarah popped in a video from a huge collection stacked in piles on the floor in a corner of what seemed to be one of many playrooms. “No one answer the door this time,” Sarah admonished them.

“Especially you, Tyler. First you ask who it is and then you unlock it and only if you know them.”

The redheaded boy was nonplussed. He shrugged and turned his concentration to an animated movie my boys had always loved, one about bugs that maintain their own community and band together to save their winter food supply from locusts. I had hated that movie when I was alive; it had epitomized the buzzing and crashing that exacerbated my Saturday morning hangovers, when Connie would go to the grocery store and I would lie on our couch, perpetrating the illusion that I was babysitting our boys, instead of the other way around. I’d always fallen back into a fitful sleep, clinging to unconsciousness because I knew the price I’d have to pay once I woke up.

Had I really squandered those hours with my sons in such a sour, useless manner? It made me want to stay with the little redheaded boy and enjoy the movie for a change, to embrace the opposite of what I’d done in life, but Maggie and Sarah were already deep in conversation in the backyard, sitting side by side atop a rickety picnic table.

“She’s really nice,” Sarah was telling Maggie. “Her husband split after she took in the sixth or seventh kid, she can’t remember which, and she doesn’t even care. She says taking care of us does the world a whole lot more good than taking care of his sorry ass.” She clapped her hand over her mouth as if afraid she might have just gotten her foster mother into trouble.

Maggie laughed. “She’s probably right about that.” She looked Sarah over more closely. “You look different already. More relaxed.”

Sarah turned her head. She didn’t want to talk about herself yet. “Sandy says I’ll be going to a different school from now on.” Her face looked sad for a second, before she hid it, but Maggie saw it anyway.

“What is it? Your friends?” Maggie’s voice softened. “In cases like yours, Sarah, we have to practically hide you. That’s why you can’t make calls out, and I guess you noticed the fence?”

“I like the fence. A lot,” Sarah said with conviction.

So did I. I was scanning the empty fields that stretched behind the house, beyond the perimeter of the fence, as well as what I could see of the yards on either side. It wasn’t quite a rural area, but it was close, and each house had several acres of green surrounding it. Small groves of trees dotted sweeping lawns and the shrubs grew thick and wild, thanks to all the room

and sunshine. Alan Hayes could be hiding in any of the groves. He could be anywhere, just watching and waiting.

“We’ll let the school know,” Maggie promised. “The social worker will make sure you get your books and anything in your locker and that you’re placed in a school and classes where you can pick up right where you left off.”

“I know.” Sarah tried to sound grateful. “She explained it to me last night.”

“Then what is it?” Maggie asked.

“My friend,” Sarah said. “I really only had one friend, but I can’t just disappear on her. She needs me.”

Maggie drew the details out of her: that the girl was a few years older, lived in Sarah’s neighborhood, rode the school bus with her, had lost her mother a year before, and was getting ready to have a stepmother forced on her. “I know she’ll need me,” Sarah said.

“I’ll go by and tell her what happened,” Maggie promised. “We’ll find a way for you to keep in touch. I’ll ask Sandy if she can call you here.”

Sarah’s face brightened. “Cool,” she said, drawing her knees to her chest. “She’s really nice and she cares about me.”

“I’m sure she does,” Maggie said.

Sarah looked up at the sky. Her voice dropped. “Have they found him yet?”

Maggie shook her head.

“Is that why you’re here?” the girl asked.

Maggie was honest. “Partly. But mostly because I wanted to know how you were doing.”

Sarah nodded. “Are you the one trying to find him?”

“Me and others,” Maggie said. “Mostly me right now. Until we process the evidence, we don’t really have anything on him yet. But once we do get evidence, a lot of people will be after him. We’ll find him then for sure.”

“You don’t know my father,” Sarah said. She pulled her knees tightly to her body like she always did when she was trying to disappear inside herself.

“What do you mean?” Maggie asked.

“He always gets what he wants,” she whispered.

“Can you help me stop him?” Maggie asked. “Can you think of anything that might tell me where he is?”

And in that endlessly ironic way of the universe, it was at that very instant—as Maggie asked where Alan Hayes was—that I saw him. The lawn next door was enormous and dwarfed the brick ranch house in its center. The occupants were obviously not home, there was no car in the driveway, but I distinctly saw a figure step out from behind one of the corners of the house and walk briskly toward a stand of overgrown bushes that anchored the center of the yard. The bushes were over six feet tall and grew entangled across an overhead trellis, so there was plenty of room for a man like Hayes to hide inside. He would have a perfect view of the backyard next door.

I did not know what to do: to go or to stay.

“Can you remember anything about what he was like when he would return from being away at night?” Maggie was asking Sarah.

The young girl thought about it. “He was always sweating,” she offered. “And he seemed tired, as if he had been exercising.”

Maggie’s face did not move. She did not want Sarah to guess at the thoughts that I could quite clearly read: torture was hard work.

As Maggie asked more probing questions, a familiar feeling of impending doom crept over me, an insistent breeze of evil that sprang forth from the tangled copse of bushes next door. I imagined Hayes, hidden in the cool shadows beneath the hanging branches, watching as Maggie took his daughter from him just as Bobby Daniels had dared to take Alissa from him. I imagined the hate he would feel for Maggie, and I needed to know where that hate might lead him. I had to know what he was planning.

And then I did not have to imagine his fury. I was there, along the edges of his hiding place, peering inside—and I could feel it. The hatred that emanated from him had the power of scalding water. I did not want it on me. He sat completely immobile, almost in a parody of his daughter, his legs bent and his knees folded precisely up against his chest, his hands clutching his legs to him as he simmered in his hatred for Maggie and all she represented to him.

I did not want to crawl inside that hiding place with Hayes. I was filled with a mixture of despair and fear. I stayed outside, needing the sanity of the sun, but I could see his vantage point from where I stood: Maggie and

Sarah, side by side, heads pressed together, whispering, forming a bond that threatened the hold Hayes had forced on his daughter.

Then, like a ray of the sun, focused by the lens of a magnifying glass until it turned into a laser beam of heat, Hayes turned his full hatred on Maggie. He had eyes only for her. He had room in his mind only for her. I felt blistering fury wash over him as a single thought took hold—*he would destroy her*. His mind flickered through the ways he might humiliate Maggie, the ways he might rip her flesh away and make her scream in agony while he stood, gloating, staring down at her, letting her know that he held the power of her life and her death in his hands. It was as if I were being forced to watch a film despicable to decent people but with a pornographic allure to others. Hayes loved his imaginings, I realized. He enjoyed feeding his wrath because he felt more and more alive the more his hatred swelled within him.

And then an even more terrible thought took hold of him. I could not quite touch it; it was there and it was evil, but all I could tell was that his mind had been distracted from Maggie, that his need for a more immediate release had overcome his obsession with harming her. His mind had wandered to another, I realized, someone who would be far easier than Maggie to take, someone more helpless, more willing to submit to his promised mercy, someone more like the one who had started it all, who had betrayed him to Maggie in the first place: someone more like his daughter.

As Hayes unfolded his long limbs and fastidiously brushed the debris from his pants, I knew where he was going. I felt sick inside as I remembered the words I'd overheard on the school bus: "My dad is taking her to Bermuda for the weekend and he's letting me stay by myself."

That beautiful, naïve, trusting, unknowing girl. Alone in her house, surrounded by hedges that hid all that happened inside from the neighbors.

Hayes would take her that day.

I knew it with every fiber of my being.

He would take her, and then he would take out every ounce of his rage toward Maggie on that helpless young girl. She would pay the price for his frenzied hatred.

I had to get there before he did.

## Chapter 29



The girl was not alone. I thanked god for teenage girls who disobey their parents and have boyfriends over when they're not supposed to. And although I knew it was possible Hayes might try to take her anyway, and harm her companion in the process, Hayes was above all else a self-preservationist. I thought there was a good chance the six-foot-tall boy lounging in the television room with the girl might dissuade Hayes from making an attempt, at least for that day. The kid was muscular and his age made him very unpredictable. He was potentially dangerous and in no way the passive victim Hayes desired—and Hayes would know it.

The two teenagers were sitting side by side on the lumpy old couch in the den. Though it was barely afternoon and the room was flooded with sunlight, the boy was a teenager, after all, and taking full advantage of being alone with the girl. She was fending his hands off routinely as she watched television. No sooner had she removed his palm from one of her breasts than he was all over the other breast, or sliding his hand up her thigh, or trying to stroke the smooth expanse of her stomach. At first she was too engrossed in the movie to care much about these familiar territorial encroachments, but when a commercial flashed on, she turned her pent-up irritation on him.

"Will you stop that," she snapped. "I told you, *no*. It's broad daylight and a Sunday afternoon and you're not even supposed to be here and I am not in the mood. Quit pawing me."

The boy looked as if she had insulted him deeply. I'd have laughed under any other circumstances, since I'd tried that hangdog expression many a time myself as a teenager. But I could not laugh because I was terrified the tiff would escalate into a full-blown fight and he would leave her alone. She must not be left alone.

“Come on, baby. What’s the difference?” He smiled. “Let’s draw the blinds and pretend it’s Friday night.”

Wrong move. Ah, but high school football players should never go out with the smart girls. They’re just too easily outsmarted by them. The girl jumped to her feet, slapped his hand away, and told him to *go now* because she had to wash her hair.

“Seriously?” the guy asked. He was incredulous. “That is the oldest excuse in the book.”

“Really?” she asked, her eye blazing. “How’s this one? Get the hell out.”

“Oh, come on, baby,” he complained as he started to rise from the couch.

No, I rooted silently. How can you give up so easily? Stay put, man. Show some backbone. Don’t leave this girl alone. Please, dear god, do not walk out that door. Do not leave this girl alone.

“You don’t really mean it,” he told her when she refused to dignify his comment with anything but silence. “You’re just going to call me in twenty minutes and tell me to come back.”

It was so the wrong thing to say. Teenage boys and their egos. This one might cost the girl her life.

“I don’t think so,” she told him, then turned her back on him and pretended to be interested in the TV. My hopes sank. She was giving him the silent treatment. There was no way to fight it. He’d have no choice but to leave.

The boy shrugged and rolled his eyes, for my benefit only since the girl refused to even look at him. And then, to my dismay, he slouched out the front door. It slammed shut, bounced, and settled into the jamb.

The girl did not lock it behind him. She had refused to give him the satisfaction of even acknowledging that he was leaving.

I rushed to the front door and peered out through a window inset in it, hoping the boy would come back. I willed him to put his pride aside. I cursed the virtue that had caused the girl to want him to leave. And I cursed a world that would let a young girl die because she’d tried to live up to being the kind of young lady her father wanted her to be.

The boy reached the end of the front walkway, then turned around and stared at the door for a moment. I peered back at him through the glass, willing him to return. And as I stood there, praying for him to come back inside, I saw it: a black SUV passed behind the boy. It was gliding slowly

down the street, its engine silent and efficient, the tinted windows hiding the occupant from view. It hesitated, nearly imperceptibly, before sliding out of view. But not to go away, I knew that with a certainty. His need was too great. Hayes would park down the block, or circle it and return. He would keep watch, he'd see the boy was leaving, and then he would return. All I could do was wait.



## Chapter 30



The girl was relieved to be alone again. She locked the front door, let out a deep breath, retrieved a journal from a hiding place under a cushion, and sat, cross-legged on the couch, writing out her frustrations. Her face was so beautiful in repose, so perfect caught in mid-concentration. Her mind was absorbed with her desire to try to parse the all-too-human riddle of being both attracted to and repelled by another human being at the same time.

How I hoped that her teenage tiff would be the only crisis this day would bring her.

I set out in search of Hayes.

He was parked in the alley behind the girl's house, his SUV concealed by the hedges and fences that a too-crowded neighborhood had put up for privacy. The alleyway was obviously used by sanitation crews to pick up garbage each week: most of the homes had backyards accessible to the narrow path by back gates flanked by neatly boxed-in garbage can areas.

The young girl's house was no exception. Hayes had parked his vehicle just a few yards down from the double doors of the gate that opened into her backyard. I checked the lock. It was still securely fastened, but it would not take him long to unlock it from the yard. If he brought her out the back way, she would be inside his SUV and gone before anyone could see what was happening.

As I approached his car, the terrifying hum of his malevolent brooding washed over me like a stench. Hayes was sitting in the front seat, calming his nerves, savoring the moments before his hunt. I could feel his blood moving through his veins. It was thick with the need to kill, as deadly as a poison.

He had stopped to make preparations on the way over from the safe house where his daughter was being kept. The backseats of the SUV had

been folded forward. The floor of the back compartment and center section were now neatly covered with a plastic drop cloth, held in place at the far end by a lightweight dolly tilted on its side. Two-inch nylon straps lay neatly coiled at intervals along the perimeter of the vehicle, placed close by metal eyes that had been affixed to the SUV's interior walls.

My stomach lurched: I didn't know where he took them, but I now knew how he got them there. And I knew by looking at his backseat that he could not wait to have them completely under his power. He had to be able to look in his rearview mirror and see them bound and spread out in the back, helpless and under his control. He was willing to take that chance, indeed he wanted to take that chance, to drive through the streets like a normal person, to idle at stop signs next to minivans filled with squalling children and harried mothers, to pass police cruisers and businessmen along the way, to offer his toll money to oblivious state workers—all with his victims bound and displayed a few feet behind him. He wanted his victims to know that he was so very much in control that he was willing to flaunt his act before others.

It was an evil so finely honed that I knew a girl as young as the one who sat writing in her journal would never have a chance. Not for a moment, not for a second. She was ripe fruit for his picking and would fall, sweet and heavy, into his palm if he so much as brushed the branch.

I was overcome with a panic so intense I was paralyzed. What could I do? How could I stop him? I had nothing to fight him with.

His breathing had slowed and his body seemed little more than a statue as he sat, posture perfect, behind the wheel of his car, waiting for the right moment to begin. He was dressed, as earlier, in impeccable charcoal gray trousers, a black golf shirt, and shiny black loafers on his feet. His face, almost dreamy as he savored his anticipation, was utterly benign. And yet, beneath all that seeming respectability, a lust to annihilate innocence simmered.

He was ready.

He slid from the car as lightly as a shadow, glanced around to satisfy himself that he was alone, then stepped quickly down the alleyway to where the girl's back fence began. He found a slender opening where the neighbor's fence ended and a perpendicular hedge that demarcated the side boundaries between the two backyards began. He groped his way through a

few bushes, then pushed past them into a shaded corner of the girl's yard, where the landscaping was thick enough to conceal him from the girl's view should she happen to look up from her writing. From there, he slipped from tree to tree, making his way closer to the house, his grace marred by the terrible certainty of what he hoped to do.

He reached the base of the deck, stooped, and crept below its perimeter until he was once again in his favorite hiding place at the corner of the house near the side driveway. There, he could wait in the shadows between the evergreen cedar bushes and see into the back room through its sliding glass doors.

The young girl had let her journal and pen slip onto the floor and was leaning back against the cushions of the couch, her eyes drooping drowsily. She yawned and lay down, her head on a pillow, her face relaxing into sleep.

To wake up to someone like Hayes standing over her was an unimaginable horror. I did not let myself think of it.

Hayes was thinking the same thing. He began to breathe more heavily but forced his mind inward until he was once more under control. I followed him around the corner of the house to a side door that led into the kitchen. He tried the door. It was locked. He crept toward the corner that led to the front of the house, but the traffic on the street out front had started to pick up. Families were returning from church. He would not risk being seen entering that way.

He returned to the kitchen door. He gripped the handle and turned it one way and then the other, putting his whole weight on it as he pushed inward. The door gave lightly everywhere but near the doorknob itself: the young girl had locked it, but failed to turn the deadbolt as well.

Hayes smiled to himself and went to work. He knew where she kept her spare key, but a lock this flimsy did not require one. He put on a pair of thin latex gloves and pulled a strip of gray metal from his back pocket, gently easing it into the opening between the door and its frame. He jiggled the doorknob as he felt his way along the edge of the pressure lock. His tongue slipped out in concentration and gently stroked his lips, and his hips thrust unconsciously to the right and then upward as he felt his way around the lock. There was something sexual in his movements, as if, in penetrating her house, he was penetrating her.

The door slid open with a click. Hayes had to lean backward to keep from falling into the kitchen. He slipped inside, then carefully pushed the door shut behind him, barely letting it touch the frame—he wanted it to open with little more than a push of his foot when he left the same way.

He inched across the tiled floor and peered into the hallway. He had only a few more feet to go before he would be at the entrance to the back room where the young girl slept. But as he stepped out onto the thick carpet of the hallway, the phone rang.

He stepped back into the kitchen calmly.

The phone rang again as the girl padded across the den's carpet. Her voice was sleepy as she answered.

It was the boy, calling to apologize. It was the boy wanting to be invited back over.

The girl would not let him come. "Drop dead, Craig," she said firmly and the sound of the receiver being slammed back in place was unmistakable.

The girl did not return to the couch. Stretching, she walked into the hallway, yawning, then ran her hand through her long hair, flipping it back over her shoulder. Hayes tensed. She walked toward the kitchen and I could feel his heart start to beat with a rapid, determined staccato.

The girl stopped and turned to go the other way.

Hayes sank back against the kitchen wall.

She made her way down the hall, passed several doors, then entered a bathroom at the far end.

Hayes followed. He stepped out into the hallway soundlessly, the carpet muffling his footsteps. The girl had pulled the bathroom door shut out of habit, even though she was alone.

I wondered if she had locked it out of habit, too.

Hayes walked silently down the hall, closer and closer to the bathroom door. The sounds of water running came from the other side, accompanied by a sweet, high voice—the girl was singing to herself. I could hear drawers opening and shutting as she rummaged through them. She was automatically searching, as I had often watched my wife search, for a lipstick or something else to dab on her face so she could feel as if she had made an effort to look her best before she stepped back into the world.

Hayes was directly on the other side of the bathroom door now, his right ear and his palms flat against the wood surface as if he were divining what

she was doing inside. The girl coughed and he flinched. She slammed a drawer shut.

He stepped back, stared at the doors lining the hall, then opened the nearest one, stuck his head in the room to check it out first, and stepped inside to wait.

I followed and knew why he had chosen this room: it was her room. And he did not want to take her until he had violated this safe place, until he had left his mark on what had once been her haven.

He walked across the pink carpet to her chest of drawers. He opened the top one and lifted some of her lingerie out, holding it up to his critical eye, frowning as if he were her father and did not approve of the maturity of her taste. He touched a photo on the top of her dresser: an older woman and a girl no more than ten or eleven years old. Her mother, I knew, probably with the young girl during a happier time. Hayes drummed his fingers impatiently against the top of the dresser, as if he were not quite satisfied.

The door to the bedroom began to open.

Hayes stepped inside the closet.

And that was what he had been waiting for. It wasn't enough to watch her from the outside as she moved inside her house. No, he needed his violation to be nearer. He needed the terror she felt when she first glimpsed him bursting out of nowhere to be a horror that was immediate, all consuming, and above all, paralyzing. I knew that to his broken mind the rush of power he would feel at seeing her panic would be far more satisfying than an orgasm.

He waited, just inside her closet door. He'd left it open a few inches so he could peer out at her as she walked restlessly around her room, trying to decide whether to lie down on the bed and nap away her last few hours of freedom or whether to use the time more productively. Her eyes lingered on a pair of running shoes tossed carelessly in a corner. She walked over to them. When she bent down to pick them up, she exposed several more inches of well-muscled leg. She was wearing a pair of shorts and they would not be enough protection if she was going for a run in the October air. She stepped out of her shorts, revealing a pair of panties so innocent they took my breath away: cotton, printed with little blue flowers, a tiny blue bow affixed neatly to the waistband.

Hayes was reveling in his secret power. His breaths were deep and his whole body vibrated with a dark joy at the proximity he had to his prey. His excitement had grown to nearly unbearable proportions. I could feel the bloodlust rising in him overtake a more ordinary sexual excitement—every cell in his body hungered for that girl; every cell in his body wanted to overtake her.

She pulled a pair of running pants from a drawer and bent over to put them on. Her long, smooth hair fell forward in a silky curtain as she did so.

Hayes touched himself when he saw her hair swing forward, but he touched himself furtively, as if such an act were beneath a man of his caliber. And in a moment of terrible insight, I realized that it would not be long before he took her captive—because the act of overpowering her, then binding and torturing her, was designed not only to satisfy a deep need inside him but also to overpower a more base desire, one he would not allow to control him.

He put his shoulder to the closet door and leaned forward, preparing for the right moment to push through and overtake her.

She stood up and was tugging her T-shirt off when the doorbell rang.

Exultation flooded through me: the boy had returned.

The girl pulled her shirt back in place and flounced angrily from the room, ready to give him a piece of her mind.

I followed, determined to get her out of the house some way, even if it cost me another episode of wrenching, diminishing pain.

But it was Maggie who stood on the doorstep, badge in hand.

Maggie, my angel. The girl's angel, too. Maggie in all of her glory.

The girl started at her, puzzled, as Maggie introduced herself and explained that she was there on an errand, sent by Sarah Hayes to let the girl know what had happened to her.

The girl invited Maggie inside, eager to hear more about Sarah, wanting to know why she was switching schools.

Maggie asked if her parents were home and frowned when she heard the father had gone off for the weekend and left his daughter alone. Maggie knew what happened when daughters were left alone. Not only because she'd been one, but because she'd picked up the pieces often enough for others in a similar situation when things had gone terribly wrong.

“It’s a complicated story,” she told the young girl. “But Sarah wants you to know what’s going on.”

The girl looked alarmed. “I knew something was wrong,” she said. “I just didn’t know what. And I didn’t want to push her.”

Maggie looked as if she did not know where to begin.

“Do you want a Coke or something?” the girl asked.

Maggie nodded, relieved to be putting the explanation off for a little while longer. She followed the girl into the kitchen and immediately noticed the side door. “Did you leave that door open?” she asked the girl, closing it and bolting both locks firmly. “You ought to know better.”

“I do,” said the girl. “I always keep it locked.”

She sounded puzzled. Maggie believed her.

She pulled her gun out and began checking the corners of the kitchen and behind the pantry door.

“What is it?” the girl asked, frightened.

“Just me,” Maggie said. “Being paranoid.”

But not paranoid enough.

I headed back toward the bedroom to find Hayes.

He was gone. A back sliding door left open in the den showed how he had escaped.

I caught up with him in the backyard. He was moving quickly toward the back fence, darting from bush to bush with an urgent haste, as he were fleeing not just Maggie, but the nakedness of his own need and what he had felt growing inside him in the girl’s bedroom. He pushed through the last pair of bushes and into the alleyway, leapt into his SUV, and roared away. I barely had time to join him before he had turned onto the main road and was barreling through the streets, driving too fast, frustration making him incautious. He ignored a stop sign, blew through it, then turned into a main thoroughfare and joined the busy flow of traffic. He seethed with a hatred unmatched until then.

Maggie had ruined his plans. Maggie had destroyed the balance of his world. Maggie had taken away his escape from his one mistake—killing his own daughter—and turned that triumph into disaster. No matter where his mind went, no matter who he tried to blame, no matter which way he turned the power of his memory, it always came back to one person: Maggie. She was to blame.

I knew then that—so long as Alan Hayes lived—Maggie was doomed.



## Chapter 31



Maggie took no chances. When I returned to the girl's house, she was in the process of calling in a crime scene crew to check it, though she had no way of knowing that anyone, much less Hayes, had been there. And she was seeing that the girl stayed with friends until her father returned. But I knew where Maggie would end up eventually. I got there first and waited for her to arrive.

Even though it was a Sunday, the crime lab was crammed with technicians assembled to process the evidence found in the Hayes basement the day before. Peggy Calhoun presided over everyone with a calm confidence. No one would make the mistake of rushing a procedure under her watch. No one would make a mistake at all. The air in the room pulsed with curiosity as man and science came together in a delicate choreography of molecular exploration.

But I was more interested in phantasm than protoplasm. I wondered if the victims might appear again, as they had in the basement of the Hayes house. But the crime lab was not a place for ghosts. This was a place for man and man's machines, contraptions that hummed and crackled and analyzed and deconstructed matter down to single molecules. No, this was a place for the living, for thoughts that sparked from synapses to synapses, forming theories, verifying ideas, gathering facts, chasing down conclusions. This was home to science. The unexplainable would not be welcome here.

Peggy had called in the entire staff. The overtime would be astronomical, but I knew that the one force greater than Maggie's resolve in this matter was the commander's desire to offer the public an antidote of competence to counteract the department's role in putting an innocent man in prison.

Evidence from the Vicky Meeks and Alissa Hayes murders was cataloged on separate ends of a central table. The items retrieved from the

compartment in the Hayes basement had already been parceled out for processing. Not a soul in the room was conscious of anything other than the microscopic world they had entered into in their quest to link Alan Hayes to the murders of both girls. The technicians worked in silence, focused on the minute mysteries before them. Peggy hopped from station to station, conferring, whispering advice, steering her crew in other directions whenever a method failed to produce results. But I sensed a growing current of distraction in Peggy as the phone rang at intervals, disrupting her concentration. When Maggie finally arrived, she gave rise to her frustration.

“Maggie,” Peggy began. “You have to get everyone off our backs. And you can’t stay here.”

“I know. I just stopped by to tell you that I don’t think they’ll find a thing at this girl’s house. Hayes is too smart. They’ll be bringing stuff in, but it’s not a priority. I need a direct link between Hayes and the Meeks murder. You have to concentrate on that.”

Peggy nodded. “It’s going to take a while yet.”

“Is there anything?” Maggie asked, her voice hopeful. “Anything at all?”

Peggy shook her head. “We can link the silt and rock residues, but that won’t get you far in court. Both substances are indigenous to this area. Anyone could pick them up walking around. The lapidary residue links him to what we found near the body, but that won’t be enough, either. He’s a geology professor. He gets around a lot of labs at the college. It could be explained away.”

“What about the items we found in his basement?”

Peggy bit her lower lip, aware she was about to disappoint Maggie. Her teeth scraped off tiny bits of orange lipstick. Some things never changed—and I found the thought comforted me. “I don’t think we’re going to get much off them. They’ve been laundered with a bleach substitute. My guess is repeatedly.”

“That bastard.” Maggie steadied herself against the table. “His memories are what he hoards, those trophies are just a catalyst for his sick memories.” She looked down, considering what she was about to say. “If I bring you something from my car, a yellow dress, can you test it?”

“For what?” Peggy asked.

“To see if it’s been laundered in the same bleach substitute.”

Peggy looked wary. “Is this off the record?”

Maggie nodded. "Yes. I can't tell you where I got it, but I need to know if Hayes had the dress in his possession."

"Okay," Peggy agreed. "But can I make another suggestion?"

"Of course." Maggie was smart enough to take her advice.

"Put the clothing you found in context. How many women of college age have gone missing from this area since he's been here?"

"Only one that hasn't been found either alive or dead," Maggie said. "Not enough to account for all that clothing."

"Some of the articles look pretty old to me." Peggy said. "The fabric has deteriorated, especially the natural fibers. I think he's had a couple of those things for as long as twenty years. Those earrings shaped like feathers? Everyone was wearing them in the mid-nineties. I even had a pair."

"You're saying most of the killings didn't occur around here?"

"I'm saying he's been building his collection since before he moved to town."

"I could call around again to all the places he's lived," Maggie said, thinking aloud. "I've already started a list of incidents in places where he's been, but I could ask to see the actual reports on missing persons or unsolved murders. If a roommate or family member was specific enough about what the girl was wearing when she was last seen, I might get a hit on some of the items."

"Garnet earrings," Peggy said.

"What?"

"His box held a pair of custom-made garnet and silver earrings. Nice workmanship. One of a kind. Heavy silver crosses inlaid with perfectly matched garnets of an unusually deep purplish red. If anything is in a report, it'll be those earrings."

"That's it?" Maggie sounded disappointed.

"It might be enough. The garnets are exceptional. That's probably why he couldn't resist keeping them. Find the jeweler who made those earrings and they'd remember the stones and setting. My guess is they were made in the early nineties, post Madonna's *Like a Prayer*."

Maggie looked at Peggy incredulously. "I can't believe you know that. What *are* you doing when you're not at work?"

Peggy was pleased at being suspected of a secret life. "They would be distinctive enough to tie him to another murder victim. I'm certain of it."

“Thanks.” Maggie hugged the older woman. “You’d make a great detective.”

“Oh, no.” Peggy’s laugh was wry. “I don’t like the big, wide world at all. My preferred world is much, much smaller.”

## Chapter 32



Maggie was relentless. She called every police district and every agency in every town where Alan Hayes had ever lived, meticulously going back over the list of murdered or still-missing girls she had compiled earlier. She logged in their descriptions, asking for lists of what they had last been seen wearing, begging overworked detectives for details of any unsolved murders that might match the evidence found in the Hayes basement or fit the profile of the Hayes and Meeks murders. What she found only made her more frantic—a growing list of girls whose bodies had been discovered discarded among the weeds in remote locations, some with ritualistic cuts marring their bodies, others with signs of ligature around their wrists, ankles, and neck. Her notes revealed a portrait of an evolving obsession, but in the end, while the list mapped out a path of mental, moral, and physical destruction, it did nothing to help Maggie link Alan Hayes to any of the murders, or any of the possible victims to items in his box of trophies. Too much time had passed. He had been too careful with the items he chose to keep. And no one had reported a missing loved one or murder victim who had been wearing garnet earrings in silver cross settings.

Even worse, a call came down from Peggy in late afternoon: none of the evidence examined had yielded any traces of DNA that could be tested against the control samples. The only possible evidentiary connection between the murders of Alissa Hayes and Vicky Meeks remained the silt and rock sediments.

“It’s not enough,” Maggie said. “We can’t let this go. He could get his daughter back, even if we brought abuse charges against him. If he finds out we have nothing, he’ll surface again. Both to taunt us and to take his daughter. He’ll say we’re harassing him because we have no other suspects. Sarah could be compelled to live with him until the charges are resolved.

I've seen it happen before, and who knows what the stepmother might say? She'll back Hayes. She'll say Sarah cut herself. All that woman wants is to keep her home in the suburbs. She'll say anything to keep it."

Whatever Peggy said in response calmed Maggie. "I know," Maggie answered. "You're right. I skipped lunch, too. Want me to pick up something for you while I'm out? What about the others?"

She wrote something down on a sheet of paper and folded it absently into her pocket. The long day of hopes raised and then dashed again had taken its toll. I could feel her spiraling out of her steely self-control and I knew she might break soon. But I also sensed she would prefer to display her human weaknesses in private. I watched as she collected her things, never once betraying frustration or fatigue to her coworkers. I followed her as she walked out to her car, and she was alert enough to scan the parking lot to see if Danny had showed up for work. He hadn't. I did my part and checked the parking lot for signs of Alan Hayes or his SUV, finding nothing.

I joined Maggie in the front seat of her car, a silent witness to what her outer resolve masked. Alone in her car, hidden from the eyes of others, Maggie wept, out of sorrow and out of fear for Sarah Hayes. Those tears were followed by tears of frustration that a killer might get away with his killing, and anger that she could not stop him.

Maggie wept silently, unwilling to make a scene, even in solitude. She held her hand over her mouth to stifle her cries while tears ran down her face like tiny waterfalls of diamonds tumbling over smooth rock, each tear a treasure, each one swelling as it reached the curve of her cheekbones before it gathered and broke to run in rivulets over her fingers.

I did not know what to do and I was infuriated by my helplessness. Her strength had drawn me to her, but it was her human frailty that kept me by her side—her ability to feel what the victims had felt, her understanding of what their loved ones were going through, her despair that the world held evil and such innocence, side by side, with no way to separate the two. It was her overwhelming desire to protect the good in this world that drove her to do what she did, but it was her fury at the evil that made her fight back. But to get from one to the other, she had to release her fears and make room for fearlessness.

I felt honored to be a part of her cleansing ritual. As her tears flowed, a great constriction in her loosened, as if, in releasing her tears, she had found

a way to release the burden of many sorrows while receiving strength in return. She was rejecting the power of evil and acknowledging what it was that mattered most to her: love, respect for life, joy at being here, a desire to protect the helpless—all those things that humans cannot see, but that remain more real than any tangible object could ever be.

As her strength returned, Maggie ran out of tears. She tucked the hair that had fallen across her face back behind her ears and fumbled in her knapsack for a tissue. More evidence my Maggie was resolutely human: she searched her knapsack for makeup and used a small brush dipped in powder to repair the signs that she'd been crying. I knew from watching Connie over the years that it was makeup intended for evening wear: the powder contained miniscule sprinkles of glitter unnoticed except by the closest inspection. I stared at the sparkles, fascinated, imagining them as the tears of her tears, the tiniest traces of her sorrow worn as a sign that she remained uninvaded by evil.

I felt another presence. Peggy had come out the front door, cigarette in hand, intending to take a quick break. But she changed course and headed for Maggie's car when she saw it. She knocked loudly at the window and Maggie rolled it down, perplexed.

"Give me your keys," Peggy said, cigarette dangling from her orange mouth. She held out a hand. "I'll get the food. Gonzales has been looking for you. He wants you in his office now. He's been calling all over and he sent someone up to the lab looking for you. By the way, your cell phone's off. Again."

Maggie scrambled from the car and handed Peggy her keys. "What does he want?"

Peggy shrugged. "Beats me. The real question is, what do you want? Better eat while you can."

Maggie glanced at the station house. "I'm not really hungry anymore."

"I'll get you what I get," Peggy decided in her raspy voice. "And I'm going to make sure you eat it, too."

As Maggie strode back toward the front door of the station house, I followed—but stepped unexpectedly into a pocket of darkness so profound it almost brought me to my knees. I stopped, overcome with fear, unable to follow Maggie into the building.

Hayes had been there. I was sure of it. And though he'd left before I spotted him, I knew he had seen Maggie get into her car and that he may well have seen her crying and reveled in her despair.

If so, he'd know that Maggie had weakened. He'd know that no progress had been made on his case. He'd know he remained unstoppable.

It shook me to my core.



## Chapter 33



I found Maggie in the commander's office, sitting next to Bobby Daniels. Daniels looked pale and ill at ease. The jagged scar on his face had started to scab and the wound looked like a miniature red lightning bolt flashing down to strike his cheek. Two elderly people sat between Daniels and Maggie. They looked respectable and concerned, and I knew they had to be his parents. They also looked apologetic—though they were the ones who had been wronged.

The discussion about Bobby's scar had apparently already taken place. I knew from the emotional distance that Daniels kept between himself and Maggie that the events of the night before remained known only to the two of them. The wound had been blamed on his last day in prison.

A cadaverously thin man named Robertson sat off to one side, evading everyone's eyes. I knew him well. He was the department's in-house counsel. He did not look hopeful. He was no doubt silently cursing my memory for having bungled the Daniels case and working out a million-dollar settlement in his head. The thought cheered me. I'd never liked the shifty little bastard.

I entered the room just as they approached the real point of their meeting, arriving in time to witness the commander's profound surprise when the older Mr. Daniels said, "We have come to thank you."

"Thank me?" the commander asked too loudly, betraying his astonishment.

Mrs. Daniels explained for her husband. "We want to thank Detective Gunn for what she did for our son."

"What did she do?" the commander asked, perplexed. I knew then that Maggie had never told him of her earlier visit to the prison, the trip she had taken out of mercy for another man's suffering, just as she had not told him

about the Double Deuce. It appeared that my Maggie was a bit of a maverick.

Was it wrong that this behavior made me love her even more?

Bobby's father grasped the situation in an instant. He was used to the intricacies that a chain of command created, I realized, as I noted his ramrod posture and neatly trimmed hair. Retired military, I guessed, and his precise, clipped way of speaking confirmed my impression.

"Detective Gunn visited Bobby in prison the second she realized he was innocent," the old man explained. "We'd like to thank her for letting decency and compassion override standard protocol." His implications were not lost on Gonzales. "We'd also like to thank her for speaking to the warden about having Bobby put in protective custody until he was released. His injuries could have been so much worse." Neither Bobby nor Maggie could look at him. "She put my son's safety first, instead of covering the department's ass. For that, we are profoundly grateful."

He had neutered the commander's thoughts of retribution against Maggie with the skill of a master. I pegged him for at least a colonel.

Oh, how the afterlife has its delights.

The commander glanced over at Maggie and their eyes held, but he quickly regained his composure. "Of course," Gonzales said smoothly. "We felt it was the least we could do, under the regrettable circumstances."

Robertson coughed in a discreet lawyerly fashion, nervous at the reference to culpability. He was thoroughly ignored by all.

"I just wanted to let your son know that we were doing all we could to get him out," Maggie said. "I wanted to let him know that he only had to hold on a little bit longer."

The parents turned their heads and looked at Maggie with synchronized gentility, a sign of how long they had been wed to one another. They seemed genuinely grateful to her for her kindness. They were good people, I realized, anchored by the moral certainty of a simple life. I felt their purity wash over me, a balm to my soul. Direct. Uncluttered. They were the kind of people I could have helped, but failed to, while I was alive—the kind of people I should have served far better. The kind of people I wish I'd been.

"The day you came to see me," Bobby Daniels told Maggie hesitantly. "It was a bad day for me, not that any of the days in there were good." He hesitated before he spoke again. "It was the day I'd woken up thinking I

could not be in that place any longer. Not one more day. That was the day you came to me.”

“Don’t you see?” his mother interrupted. “You were sent to him.” She started to cry and her husband patted her knee gently.

The commander looked away and studied the view out of his window before he glanced back at Daniels. “We are profoundly grateful ourselves that justice has been done,” he finally said, and I think that everyone in the room—except for me, who knew better—believed that Gonzales was sincere. “Detective Gunn has conducted herself with the utmost integrity and displayed great ingenuity with the new investigation. She’s heading it up, you know, and I intend to see that she is commended for her outstanding efforts.”

*That’s right, Lazaro Gonzales, I thought: find their soft spot and start kissing it. Give them what you think they want to hear.*

But he was wrong about what they wanted to hear.

“We’re not planning to sue,” Bobby Daniels said abruptly, speaking directly to Robertson.

Robertson could not hide his surprise. No wonder he was a lousy lawyer.

“You’re just here to thank me?” Maggie asked. She paused. “I get . . . thanked so seldom.” God bless her, she did not know what else to say. I was charmed.

“Yes,” Bobby Daniels said, his hands rubbing his new slacks nervously. “But we’re also here to help you. I can help you.”

Maggie and the commander stared at him, puzzled.

“What my son is trying to say,” Mr. Daniels said firmly, “is that, back when you first looked into things, he was, perhaps, not in a condition to remember things clearly, or to answer your questions as well as he could. Nor could he be of much help when you visited him in . . . that place.”

“No, of course not,” Gonzales murmured. “Perfectly understandable.”

“My son has been thinking about many of the things Detective Gunn asked him during her visit,” the father said. “He believes he has additional information that might help Detective Gunn.”

“Of course.” Gonzales rose to his feet. His forced goodwill swelled to fill the room, squeezing the genuine emotion right out of it. “Why don’t we let your son and Detective Gunn chat in my office while I show you around the station house? Wait until you see how many people we have working on

this case.” He nodded at Bobby. “We intend to see that justice is done for your son’s fiancée.”

No one corrected his mistake. Alissa and Bobby had never even been given the chance to get as far as an engagement—and Bobby would live a lifetime wondering if she had been his one.

“That’s very kind of you,” Mr. Daniels told him, helping his wife to her feet. “Let’s just leave them alone for a while, Camilla.”

As the couple followed Gonzales and Robertson out the door, I saw the old man cast his son a look that I could not quite read. It was, perhaps, a fatherly warning. No, that was too strong. More like a father lending his son strength. I saw love in his look—love and sternness.

“Thank you for not saying anything about last night,” Bobby whispered once he was alone with Maggie. He barely breathed the words, as if he were afraid to say them out loud, perhaps fearing Gonzales was taping their conversation.

Maggie nodded her acknowledgment.

“My father served in the Vietnam War,” Bobby explained in a more normal voice. “He was career military. They had me late in life.”

Maggie looked unsure about where the conversation was headed.

“He’s seen things so very terrible that he says he believes that anything is possible when it comes to human behavior,” Bobby said. “No matter how awful it may be.”

“He’s right,” Maggie said quietly.

“I know that now.”

“Yes,” she said. “You’ve lived among them. You know that now.”

“He thinks I need to tell you about Alissa’s father, even though it’s only a feeling. My father never liked him. They met twice. Both times my father insisted afterward that there was something wrong with her father.”

“Like what?”

“He wouldn’t say,” Bobby explained. “He just said that Mr. Hayes had something missing in him that decent people had, no matter how good he might look on the outside. My mother hushed him up and said it was losing his wife that had made him that way. But my father disagreed.” He paused. “My father once told me that if I really cared about Alissa, I would take her away from her father as fast as I could.”

Maggie stared at him more intently. “What did you think he meant when he said that to you? Tell me what came into your mind.”

“I thought of all the times her father had waited up for us until I brought Alissa home, how angry he was, even though we never broke her curfew and she was twenty years old by then. I thought of the way he would look at me—he really hated me, you know. Truly hated me. He felt I had taken Alissa from him. I always blamed him for . . . for what happened to me in the end. I didn’t blame the detectives. I didn’t help myself much at the time, you know. They only did what anyone would have done.”

“That’s kind of you to say,” Maggie said grimly. “Though you may not quote me on it.”

“I thought, at the time, that Mr. Hayes was just being protective, like any father might be. I don’t really know how fathers are toward their daughters. I don’t have any sisters. And Alissa was my first real girlfriend.”

Maggie nodded, willing him to go on.

“But his protectiveness went beyond that, I think, and . . .” He paused.

“And what?” Maggie prompted.

“He lied about me at the trial and during the investigation. Again and again. He said things about me that just weren’t true.”

“Did you tell Detectives Bonaventura and Fahey that?” Maggie asked, though she knew the answer.

Shame washed over me as Bobby Daniels answered. “I kept telling them he was lying. But they didn’t really hear me. Or they didn’t believe me. I don’t know which.” He hesitated. “There must be a record of what I said in the files.”

Maggie raised her eyebrows but said nothing. I knew what she was thinking and was humiliated by her thoughts: not only would his protests not be in the file, Danny and I had kept them out on purpose to bolster our case.

But Bobby Daniels wasn’t really concerned about how he had been treated. What he wanted, and what he needed, was justice for Alissa. He stared at Maggie as he spoke, needing her agreement. “Why would he lie if he wasn’t trying to hide something?”

“Are you coming to me out of vengeance?” Maggie asked gently. “Because putting the wrong man in jail again won’t take away what happened to you.”

“No,” he said. “I understand that he saw me differently from the way Alissa saw me, but it went beyond that. The change was so sudden. One moment he tolerated me, and the next, when I started going out with Alissa? I became his enemy. Instantly. He was my graduate advisor, you know?”

Maggie nodded.

“He was fine toward me before I started seeing Alissa. Maybe a little aloof. Certainly unpredictable. Interested in my progress one day and distracted the next.” He shrugged. “I guess a lot of advisors are like that. But after I started seeing Alissa, the way he acted toward me changed so much. He was no longer distracted or uninterested. It was worse.”

“How?” Maggie asked.

“He never took his eyes off me. I couldn’t walk across the room without him following my every move. I couldn’t leave a room without him, literally, following me. It was like he was . . .”

“Hunting you?” Maggie suggested.

Bobby considered it. “Yes, I’ve seen that look since. Many times in prison.” He closed his eyes against the memories. “It was like he was hunting me.”

“Because you were going to take Alissa from him?”

Bobby Daniels nodded. “Yes. And I think that’s why he killed her. To keep that from happening. He killed her because of me.” With that, he broke down, unable to continue. His sobs filled the room, as did his shame. Maggie did not judge or pity or comfort him. She waited him out.

“You must think I’m insane,” he mumbled as he struggled to regain his composure. “I do nothing but cry in front of you.”

Maggie took both of his hands in hers. “Bobby, most people would not have survived what you went through. Most people would have come out of that prison with a heart so black and so shrunk with hate that there would be no room in it for anything but revenge. But you survived intact. And it’s over. You survived. If you want to break down and cry in relief for a solid year at that miracle, believe me, I understand. It’s something to cry about. No one would think otherwise.”

Daniels looked away, his eyes seeking the sunshine that waited outside the window. When he spoke, his voice was flat. “He thought of her as nothing more than one of his possessions. She was his territory, like his hill.”

“His hill?” Maggie asked. “What do you mean, ‘his hill’?”

“She was like the hill he used to walk up and down each night for exercise. He acted like he owned it. No one else was allowed to walk with him. Or behind him. Or near him. And he hated it when strangers intruded. It wasn’t just that he wanted to be alone. He acted like he owned that stupid path. He forbid Alissa and me to walk along it, even when he wasn’t there. As if that could . . . stop us from being alone.” He became lost in a memory that I could feel was a good one, time spent with Alissa, and I willed other good memories to follow this one, so that they might obliterate the bad memories he held inside.

“Where was this hill?” Maggie asked him carefully.

Bobby Daniels described it—a hill near the old rock quarry, along the far side of the college.

It was the same hill where Vicky Meeks had been found.

“Bobby,” Maggie told him in an urgent voice. “I want you to leave here as soon as you can. Go back to Kansas City with your parents, see your relatives, and celebrate your freedom—then take some time off and go away with your parents somewhere. Don’t tell anyone but me where you’re going.”

Bobby looked at her, puzzled. “Why?”

Maggie’s fear filled the room. She knew what she was up against—and I knew she was right to fear it, because I had felt it, and I knew it had the power to snatch your soul right out of your body and smite it into cinders.

“Alan Hayes is missing,” she explained. “He hasn’t come home since we searched his house. No one knows where he’s gone. And I think your life is in danger because of him. I think he was at the Double Deuce last night.”

Bobby stared at her. “What if I remember something else that might help?”

“Then you call me,” Maggie said, handing him her card. “But don’t tell anyone else but me where you are. Do you understand?”

He nodded solemnly.

“You must protect your parents,” she explained. “They’re in danger, too. He knows your father can see through him. He’d have picked up on that. And if he hears you’re part of my investigation in any way, all of you are in danger.”

“So you do think it’s him?” Bobby said. “My father was right?”

“Yes,” Maggie said. “Your father was right. The world is full of more terrible things than anyone of us will ever know. There are people that walk this earth, who walk among us, who feed on pain and who exist solely to destroy the happiness of others.”

“I knew men like that in prison,” Bobby said softly.

But Maggie shook her head. “Not exactly. Those men are in prison because some part of them, somewhere, wanted to be caught. So they made a mistake. But Alissa’s father? He won’t make a mistake. Because your father’s right: there is something missing in him. And you don’t want to know what it is.”

“I do want to know,” Bobby said. “I need to know. I need to know what happened to Alissa.”

Maggie looked sadder than I had ever seen her look. I thought my heart might break for what she was feeling. She didn’t just empathize with people, she fed on their pain before they could, offering herself as a receptacle for the terrible unknowns of what their loved ones had gone through so that they would never have to imagine the unimaginable themselves.

“Bobby,” she said firmly. “You don’t want to know what happened to Alissa. Go on with your life, remember all the beautiful things about her, and don’t ever look back.”

He stared at her.

“Not ever, Bobby,” she whispered. “Not ever.”

He wanted to ask more, he would have asked more. But the room exploded with noise as two uniformed cops burst through the door, a harried administrative assistant close behind them.

“He’d want to know,” one of them was saying, but he stopped short and stared when he saw Maggie.

“What?” Maggie asked sharply.

“We heard you were in a wreck,” the patrolman explained, sounding confused. “At an intersection a couple blocks up Independence. It just came over the radio—”

“Peggy,” Maggie cried as she jumped to her feet. She was out the door before anyone else could react. I was right behind her.



## Chapter 34



The intersection was in chaos. Maggie's car had rolled over several times and come to rest smashed against a telephone pole. The roof and driver's side door were crumpled in and the hood was jackknifed against the front windshield. A fire hydrant nearby had been sheared off and water sprayed out in a wide arc over the scene. Oil swirled over the surface of growing puddles nearby, creating miniature rainbows of incongruent beauty.

Two fire trucks and four patrol cars had responded to the scene, with more arriving every minute. All were being frantically cleared away to make way for the Jaws of Life rescue team with their portable engine and strangely oversized hydraulic tools that looked like weapons out of a science fiction movie. They worked with choreographed determination, positioning the spreader, attaching the piston rod, and readying the cutter nearby. They used the spreader to pry the front door open and a rescue worker placed a ram against the driver's side floor. He began extending the piston rod, working frantically to push the dashboard up to create enough space to free Peggy from the car.

A growing crowd formed a shield around the wrecked car. Policemen were starting to direct cars around the scene and were pushing back the curious that stood in a ring around the wreck. I scanned the crowd eagerly witnessing the disaster, trying to find Maggie, and recognized several faces: the two men and the woman who had been at the Double Deuce the night before, staring at the bloodied victims of the fight, as if waiting for death to arrive.

Unless that's exactly what they were.

The watchers felt my presence and looked up at me, furtive at being caught. No, it was more than that. They seemed almost frightened that I had spotted them. Just then, a car drove by the scene too fast and had to swerve

to avoid by-standers. People screamed and I looked away at the sound. The car recovered and sped on, the crowd unharmed, but when I looked back at the wreck, the watchers were gone.

Who were they? *What* were they? And why did they fear me?

Did this mean that Peggy would live?

An angry murmur was starting to run through the crowd like an electrical current: Maggie was shoving her way through the onlookers. There was no way she would be stopped. The patrolmen guarding the perimeter recognized her and let her though. She pushed to the front of the rescue group and I caught a glimpse of her face as she reached out to Peggy, still trapped in the car—and what I saw in her face, oh, what I saw in her face. It could not be good. Whatever Maggie had seen in the car, I knew it could not be good.

What I saw next made it all worse. I saw Danny. He stood half a block away, staring toward the chaos, staring at Maggie, mouth open. And he was covered with blood. Blood smeared his face and stained his shirt, and his hands were drenched in it as if he wore long red gloves. He stood as if he were in a daze—had he somehow been in the car with Peggy? No, I had seen Peggy drive off alone. That could not be the case. But he had gone to her after the wreck; that was where he'd picked up the blood. Had he been the one to call it in?

Or had he been the one to cause it?

Gonzales had arrived. He strode through the crowd like a conquering hero, people parting before his authority and gawking at his uniform. Danny saw Gonzales, too. He turned and walked rapidly away. I followed. His car was parked farther down the block. It had been pulled so hastily to the side of the road that two of its wheels were propped up on the sidewalk and the driver's door still hung open. Danny hopped inside, anxious to get away before he was spotted. As he pulled from the curb, I saw that his old clunker was just as dented and dirty as ever—but not more so. He had not run Peggy off the road.

But someone else had. I knew with a certainty that someone had tried to kill Maggie. And Peggy had paid the price.

And Danny had been nearby. He would know who had done it.

I walked back toward the wreck, scanning the crowd and the cars crawling down the street, hoping to catch a glimpse of Alan Hayes. But

there were too many people, too many lights flashing, too much newly descended dusk, and way too much confusion to separate all the sounds and sights and voices coming at me. Hayes would be long gone by now, anyway. He'd have left, thinking he had succeeded in stopping Maggie.

I thought about how Hayes had not tried to take her or torture her, as he had the others. He had not had the courage for that. He had simply tried to stop her as expediently as possible.

He was afraid of her.

It gave me some satisfaction.

Rescue workers had extricated Peggy from the car and were securing her to a spinal board. The shards of glass embedded in her cheeks and forehead glittered in the glare of the overhead streetlights.

Maggie was crying openly and holding her friend's hand, murmuring to Peggy as the emergency medical technicians transferred her to a waiting stretcher. No one dared tell Maggie to step away. No one stopped Maggie from climbing inside the ambulance with Peggy. No one even stopped her when she drew her gun and took a seat by her unconscious friend, then placed her gun across her lap and scanned the crowd, as I had scanned it, searching for Hayes.

She, too, had put it all together. She would be on her guard now.

Hayes had made a mistake in failing when he tried to take Maggie out. With someone like Maggie, that one mistake might be all she needed to survive—and to conquer. She would be looking for him now.

Gonzales stood near a rear bumper of the wrecked car, staring at it without inspiration. He seemed distracted, irritated at his job being made once more, somehow, harder, just when he thought he had contained the damage.

An older couple stood behind him on the sidewalk, taking it all in, and a third figure huddled in the shadows behind them, looking like a man trying to disappear from a too-jangled world: Bobby Daniels and his parents.

The older Daniels was examining the crowd methodically, his eyes alert, an odd look on his face. It was a look I thought a man could easily come to fear.

He knew, I thought. He knew, somehow, that Alan Hayes had caused all this. He felt it, too. He could feel when Hayes was near.

With that thought, a wild hope shot through me. I was not alone. I was not the only one who saw Alan Hayes for what he was. I was not the only one who would be trying to help Maggie.

For once, Alan Hayes would be the hunted.

## Chapter 35



Where would Hayes go? He could not go home—his house was being watched. Nor would he dare return to his office at the college. He had to be wherever he took his victims. His hidden safe house was nearby somewhere.

I made my way to a pond the town had dug several years before in the center of its downtown park. I was always alone there at night. No one else felt safe there, far from civilization—and far from screaming distance—once the office workers had all packed up and gone home. At this time of year, not even the bums sought a good night's sleep on the benches that rimmed the pond. But I did not need to fear muggers, or the night. I liked to sit on the bench at the far end of the pond, just beyond a spotlight cast by a street-lamp overhead on a circle of rippling water near the intake pipe. The ripples sparkled in the night, reflecting stars and clouds, creating a patch of endless universe undulating on the water's surface that fascinated me. This was where I felt connected to all things; that patch of water was a portal into infinity for me. This was where I liked to think. I sat, surrounded by silence, contemplating every move Alan Hayes had ever made, reviewing every word he had ever uttered, cataloging every scrap of information others had offered on him. I was trying to find a clue about where he might have gone.

I knew it had to be there somewhere. And I knew it was my job to find out where. Maggie would be at the hospital with Peggy, Gonzales was distracted—there was no one left to lead the team. But Hayes would be moving, and he'd be moving swiftly, to complete whatever dark ritual he felt the need to indulge in. I did not want to even think of his possibilities. Where would he go? Where would a man like him feel safe? I had to find out for us all.

It took me over an hour replaying all I had heard about him, over and over in my head, before it came to me: a comment Bobby Daniels had made a few hours earlier, when speaking to Maggie privately: “He acted like he owned it,” Bobby had said, speaking of how Hayes acted about the hill at the far side of town. *He acted like he owned it.*

He’d be hiding near that hill. He thought of it as his.

His hill. His daughter. Alan Hayes certainly had a sense of entitlement. But in his anger over having either claimed by others, he had made a mistake. By forbidding Bobby Daniels to even tread on that hill, he had tipped his hand.

I thought of the grove Maggie had discovered the day after Vicky Meeks had been discovered and of the hidden watcher who had run away when Alissa Hayes appeared to him.

It had been Alan Hayes. His lair had to be nearby. I would find it.

There are not many things I can do in my present form, other than to face my human mistakes and wish my life had been different. But I can roam. Oh, how I can roam. I can roam the hills with the best of them, and I need not worry about my safety nor wait for daylight to start my travels.

Maggie would eventually realize the significance of it being his hill. But she would have to wait until daylight to search it. Me? I’d find his hiding place tonight and then, in the morning, I would find a way to lead Maggie to it.

I set off for the hill. I moved through the streets and over the sidewalks of my town, watching as twilight gathered in the sky and families gravitated toward home, their steps quickening as they neared their blocks, drawn to the safety and warmth of those who knew them, drawn to the light of home and hearth. And though evolution and extinction had long since erased the dangers of the night for most, I knew that darkness still signified danger for most humans. Not for me. A bright moon above was as welcoming as the sun. And a night sky sprinkled with stars behind it was even better. I would have that hill to myself. Soon I would find out his secrets.

I pondered the nature of Alan Hayes as I moved through the darkness. What would a man devoid of humanity depend on to fill the empty places inside him? Arrogance, I thought. Cunning. Unquenchable rapaciousness. And, no doubt, an immense sense of self-satisfaction.

I thought about his cunning. If he had a hiding place on the hill, what had driven Alan Hayes to leave Vicky Meeks so close to his secret hiding place? If his daughter Sarah had spoken the truth to Maggie and he had not used the basement for his darkest purposes but had, instead, taken his victims to a place only he knew about, a place where he could take his time, it would likely be on this hill he felt a need to claim. But it had been sloppy of him to leave Vicky Meeks on that same hill. Had arrogance overridden cunning? Maybe he had grown so good at what he did that the thrill of being caught had faded, perhaps he was driven by a need to dance near that line?

No, Alan Hayes would not make a mistake like that. He'd only have dumped the body close to his hiding place if he'd absolutely had to.

I had been a detective once. And I had been a good one once, though that had been much longer ago than my death. I had, in fact, been considered the best prospect in all the academy, outclassed only by Lazaro Gonzales and his dazzling skills at ingratiating himself with instructors. Now Gonzales was commander and I was dead. But I still had the knowledge in me that I'd had back then—I had that knowledge and so much more.

I reached the hill just as the moon had climbed to its peak in the sky. I sat on a rock, watching, as the sky turned a deep, rich, almost luminescent blue that seemed to draw the stars to it. It felt good to be alone at times like this, and my solitude settled easily on me.

Then I saw a tiny figure far up the hill with a black spot dancing around it.

Of course. The old man and his dog. The man who had discovered Vicky Meeks in the weeds. This was his hill, too. For as long as Alan Hayes had been using it for his own darker purposes, this man had been using it as a farewell to each day and a place to greet the dawn. This was his place of solitude before he returned to a house full of other people, other voices, and all the responsibilities of his responsible life. The old man would not give up his walks on the hill just because he'd found a body. No, he, too, needed his rituals and his hill.

I saw the connection. Perhaps the old man had spooked Alan Hayes the day before Vicky Meeks was discovered. Maybe that was why Hayes had left her body in a place so close to his hiding place. He had probably been moving the body when he heard the old man drawing close on an early morning walk. He'd had no choice but to dump it where he was and to run.

As I imagined the scene, a habit I had used long ago when I still cared about my job, it was as if my thoughts now had the power to inspire a rewind of reality. I saw it all with clarity in my mind: a night like this, hours later, hovering on the edge of dawn, stalled by approaching daylight, still lit by the moon, the air crisp and clean, stars winking out above, the end of a perfect autumn night—and the perfect time to dispose of the girl who had so inconveniently died on him at last, taking away his pleasures. He'd leave his hiding place with her body somehow, a plan in mind to take the body to his car below and dispose of her elsewhere, far from his hiding place. He'd not have gotten far when he heard the old man approaching, or perhaps the little dog barking nearby, smelling him, smelling the body, alerting his owner that all was not well.

He'd have to move quickly. He'd have to move off the path to a place as close by as possible. He'd have to dump the body and run. And he'd be angry that his own routine had been interrupted by something so inconsequential and unworthy as an old man and his yappy little dog.

He'd be hoarding that anger still.

I stood up abruptly, ready to search the hill. The rock quarry on the other side of the hill offered a hundred hiding places. There were caverns and cul-de-sacs among the mountains of rocks, abandoned clearings, the desolate bottoms of dried-out reservoirs. But he would not be in the quarry. If he'd been surprised by the old man and his dog, and if he'd been using the clearing in the woods for some of his more public fantasies, he'd have to have a hiding place somewhere closer to where the body of Vicky Meeks was found. He would not run back uphill to dump her, away from the old man, not with a body in tow. He'd run downhill instead. Which meant his hiding place was above both the clearing and the crime scene.

I could see it as clearly as life and I knew that I was right. I, Kevin Fahey, had blown it utterly and thoroughly when alive. But in death? In death, I was a detective again. A good detective. I knew I was right.

I headed for the spot where Vicky Meeks had been discarded among the weeds like the unwanted remains of a meal. I found nothing and headed uphill toward the clearing where Maggie and I had seen a figure running through the woods. But again, there was nothing malignant lingering there. It felt like nothing more than an altar to the night, awaiting the scratchings and scurryings of night creatures—and so I moved on.



I continued upward, alert for signs that the old man and his dog were on the same path. I did not want to risk exposure and dogs were tricky. The little terrier had not bothered me before, but perhaps he'd only been distracted by the scent of a decomposing body nearby.

I was close to the crime scene when I heard whistling: a classic swing song popular during World War II. The old man was near.

I melted back into the shadows just as he rounded a curve in the path, anxious to get home now that he had lingered too long into the night, perhaps more anxious than usual because he was remembering the dead girl he'd discovered a week before.

But I, too, had lingered too long. The little dog sensed my presence and pulled away from his master, growling more like a Rottweiler than a terrier. He darted toward me, yapping furiously, pursuing me into the bushes. I got a glimpse of the old man's face, pale and worried in the moonlight, and I feared he might have a heart attack, so sudden and overwhelming was his terror. I could hear his thoughts as they rushed through his mind: *Why had I taken a walk so late at night? Why had I tempted fate? What will my family say if I don't return home? How could I have been so careless?*

I fled, not wanting to frighten the old man further, hoping to leave the little dog behind. But the damnable beast kept pace, and there was no question now that he could see me. I moved quickly through the underbrush, relentlessly pursued by the dog. His determination would have been comical had I not been thoroughly annoyed. The damn thing wiggled beneath the brambles that did not bother me, leapt over rocks with a joyous abandon, darted around trees, and sent leaves flying as his paws scuttled over the forest floor. So far as he was concerned, he was doing his job, and what a grand game it was indeed.

I could not shake him. He pursued me endlessly, rattling me so much I became unsure of where I had been and where I had yet to go. I needed to find the path. I took off to my left, through a heavy tangle of dormant bushes that would surely at least slow the beast down, then I moved through a patch of pines that had established a small colony deep in the hardwood hills. I smelled asphalt ahead and reached the path again, moving quickly uphill where I knew the old man would be reluctant to follow his dog. Perhaps he'd command the dog to heel and I'd be left alone.

But that damn little beast was too quick for me, and he was a far better pursuer than I had ever been. He was with me on the path in an instant, his barks and growls triumphant. What could I do now? I couldn't swat him and I couldn't shake him. I had to keep moving until his master called him off.

I reached the crest of a ridge, the little dog still on my heels. I had nowhere to go. I followed the path around a bend and it continued to wind slowly upward, the steepness of its slope softened by its circular route. The boulders grew larger, the rock interface taller as I neared the top of the hill. Behind me, the dog had settled into a series of annoying yips. It sounded like I had an incredibly loud, nasal beeper affixed to my rear end. There was a reason I'd never let my boys have a dog, I thought grimly as I searched for some way to shake it.

The asphalt path stopped in a clearing surrounded on three sides by massive rocks that had tumbled from the pinnacle of the hill to a depression in the ground, forming a natural barrier. The paved walkway ended abruptly against one of the granite boulders. End of the line.

I went right, through a tumbled pile of rocks, and into the underbrush surrounding the crest of the hill. A hundred feet into the overgrown area, I knew I was lost, but I kept moving. If I found a space small enough to hide in, the little dog would not be able to follow. Then I saw it: a tangle of dried brush and brambles at the base of another outcropping of conjoined boulders. What the hell, I'd head right into the rocks and see what happened.

I moved through the brambles and discovered an unexpected clearing no more than four feet wide. The forest floor had been stamped down and smoothed; dark earth showed through the coating of fallen leaves. I examined the brush surrounding the clearing more closely and discovered a makeshift blind made of dried branches woven together and propped up against the rocks. Behind it, where the rocks came together, I saw the opening to what looked like a cave.

I knew at once I had found the hiding place where Alan Hayes took his victims. Death lingered outside the entrance, drawing me to it with the power of an inescapable but self-destructive impulse. I could not turn back.

The entry hole was no larger than a linebacker, but it was big enough for a normal person to slip through, and certainly big enough to drag a body in

and out of. I stepped through the opening, into a narrow pathway formed by rock walls, seeking the cavern that must be inside.

Behind me, the little dog was barking and clawing his way through the bushes, relentless in its pursuit.

What if someone waited inside? I would be putting the dog and the old man in danger.

I stopped and listened, heard nothing, then tried to will my intuition into being. The cave ahead felt empty.

I stepped forward into the darkness.

## Chapter 36



It was a place of absolute and unequivocal evil. I was filled with such fear it was as if my very bones were hollow and filled with ice.

My eyes needed no adjusting to the darkness. The cave had curving gray rock walls marked by round, battery-operated lights that were affixed to the sides at six-foot intervals. If illuminated, the room would be as bright and barren as a laboratory, albeit a prehistoric one—and one focused solely on death. A waist-high ridge in one of the walls formed a natural counter along one side. Metal instruments were laid out along the ledge, neatly lined up across a folded towel. They were surgical tools of some sort, some with jagged edges, others with blades, still more seemed to combine the functionality of saws and pliers in a bewildering array of handles and clamps. A propane torch and a two-burner gas stove stood beside the instruments, with extra cans of fuel nearby.

Two large boulders protruded halfway up through the center of the dirt floor, their flattened tops creating natural altars. Chains ending in adjustable cuffs were bolted to both ends of each stone altar. Dark stains marred the cave floor surrounding the boulder farthest from the entrance. I did not need to wonder why. In this dank environment, spilled blood would pool and bond with the soil that barely covered the rock bed beneath it.

Plastic buckets were stored next to the natural ridge along one wall, and there were two five-gallon containers of water next to them. Household bleach, other cleaners, and a bucket with plastic tubes coiled carefully inside completed the neat row of supplies. Alan Hayes was, as always, a fastidious man.

There were no signs of mementos, no photographs of his victims, no initials etched in rock. There was no indication at all that the girls he'd killed had been anything more to him than experiments between flesh and

stone, not even his own daughter. He had punished her for preferring the company of another man by reducing her to meat on his altar, with no emotion other than desire to dominate driving his cruelty.

I searched the walls, looking for an exit, and discovered a small recess at the back of the cave where one rock wall slipped behind another. The gap led nowhere and was little more than a vertical, coffin-sized indentation. Other than that, the walls were relentlessly smooth and there was no way out except the way I had come in. With the entranceway blocked, it was the perfect trap for his victims. They had nowhere to run.

Outside the cave, I heard the little dog barking furiously, but I did not know how to silence him. If I approached, he would only yap louder, attracting the attention of his owner—and he might also attract a killer. If Alan Hayes was nearby and found the man and his dog here, there would be nothing I could do to stop another murder. I thought of the old man's memories I had sensed when I'd first seen him, knelt in prayer beside a dead girl's body. For such a kind man, loved by so many, to die at the hands of Alan Hayes was unthinkable. But what could I do?

The little dog's barking ceased abruptly. I peered out the entranceway. The old man had followed his dog's yapping up the hill and somehow clawed his way through the bushes in hopes of retrieving his beloved pet. I stood just inside the cave, listening, as he scolded the terrier.

"Enough, Rufus," he said as he tried to drag his dog toward him. Then the old man fell silent and I knew that he, too, had noticed the cave opening. "Hush," he said more gently to his dog. "Stay."

The old man pulled the blind of interwoven branches aside and shuffled toward me in the darkness, making his way into the cavern. His eyes were not as welcoming of the dark as mine and he fumbled about in his pockets until he found his keys. He had a tiny penlight affixed to his key chain and swept the beam across the cavern. Seeing the mounted lights on the walls, he moved slowly toward them, steadying his hands against the rock so he would not stumble in the dark. He flicked a light on, flooding the cave with light, and I heard his sharp intake of breath as he froze at what he saw. He walked reluctantly to the dark stains pooled at the base of the far altar and dipped his fingers in the dirt. He smelled them, then flung the dirt from his hand and fled from the cave, unwilling to linger long enough to turn the light off.

I joined him in the clearing outside the cave. He was trembling and his little dog began to bark. Had the dog seen me?

“Hush,” the old man warned the terrier, but the little dog was not interested in me or in his owner’s commands. He was staring off into the forest, hearing sounds we could not hear, tracking odors we could not smell.

The moon slid out from behind a bank of clouds, illuminating the old man and his dog in a natural spotlight. Bathed in moon glow, they looked otherworldly. We were, all too briefly, three of a kind.

The old man was fumbling in his coat pockets, his whole body shaking at the realization of what he had seen. The little dog, sensing his fear, stopped barking briefly and stretched out, laying his head on his master’s boots and whimpering in sympathy.

The old man located his cell phone, but continued to search his pockets, unable to find what he needed. He grew more and more agitated. His face was as pale as the faces of the undead I had met in my wanderings. He was having trouble breathing and I again feared he might have a heart attack. At last, he pulled out a business card, peering at it in the pale moonlight.

As he dialed, I remembered Maggie interviewing him the night he had found the body of Vicky Meeks—and I knew he was calling her. I would not have to find a way to alert Maggie to the cave. The old man would do it for me.

His voice was trembling when he reached her and told her what he had found. “It’s a hidden cave in the rocks. There’s blood soaked into the dirt floor. I think this was where the young girl was killed.” He listened intently and looked around. “I haven’t seen anyone else, but . . .” His voice trailed off. “My dog was chasing something. Maybe just an animal. He’s the one who found the cave. I just followed him.” He listened again. His hand started to shake violently. He gripped the phone harder and his voice rose an octave. “If I leave, we may never find it again,” he said. “It’s completely hidden by bushes. If you can’t find me, we may never stop this monster from doing what he does. There are things in the cave, instruments that he uses on them . . .”

His voice failed him, but I could sense the bravery rising in the old man, a remnant of youth and long-ago wars—but also a courage strengthened by his age and fed by his growing wisdom. He was a man who did not believe

in standing by and simply watching. He was a man who chose to participate.

“I can’t do that, Detective Gunn. I’m waiting here,” he told Maggie more firmly. “I’ll listen for your voice. When you reach the end of the path, take a right and start calling for me. Head downhill just a little, maybe fifteen degrees or so. I’ll call out when I hear you and you can follow my voice.”

His courage wavered at Maggie’s reply and his voice was somber as he rung off. “Yes, I understand. I’ll hide if I hear someone coming.”

But he didn’t hear someone coming, nor did his little dog. Alan Hayes was behind the old man the instant he hung up his cell phone. Judgment was swift: raising a rock above his head, Hayes brought it down on the old man’s skull with a crack, sending him crumpling to the ground.

The little dog looked up at Alan Hayes, whimpered once—and fled at what he saw looking back down at him.

## Chapter 37



Hayes dragged the old man's body into the cave as casually as if he was dragging a sack of garbage to the curb. I followed.

Watching Hayes over the past week, I had grown to respect the existence of evil. Unsure of both its source and its power, I stood in the recess between the two walls of the cave, watching as Hayes left the body where it would be partially concealed by the stone altars. The old man meant absolutely nothing to him. He was little more than a prop that Hayes could amuse himself with.

Hayes went about the business of sweeping the dirt floor smooth again with a broom he kept stored in a corner. He whistled lightly as he worked: an insipid disco song from decades before that bemoaned the singer's chance at having one night only for love.

Why had Hayes chosen that song? His mind was a mystery to me, with no connection to humanity that I could feel, at least not one based on any definition of humanity I was willing to face.

The old man lay sprawled less than three feet from me. I strained to discern whether there was any life left in him. He was dying at my feet. I could feel his life force vibrating as faintly as the high chords of a harp, then growing thinner with each passing second.

I could not let him die.

I knelt by the old man's body, as he had knelt by the body of Vicky Meeks. I prayed, though I did not know who to pray for, and had last talked to god when I was no more than ten years old. My hope then had been a reprieve from Catholic school punishment for taking his name in vain. I thought that god suddenly seemed like a very long shot. But who else could I pray to? Who was there to listen? Was there a patron saint of good over evil? Who would embrace such a terrible, lost cause as that?



Oh, yes, I thought, as a long-lost memory of a catechism lesson came to me at last: St. Anthony, the patron saint of lost causes. My long-dead father's namesake. Whether he had been but a man, or whether my mother had been right—and all the saints and angels in Heaven were real—I could not say. But my existence was proof, at the very least, that the universe consisted of more than I had expected, so I decided to give St. Anthony a shot. If that didn't work, perhaps someone else, perhaps god himself, was eavesdropping and would hear my unworthy prayers.

The irony was not lost on me: I had finally gotten religion. All it had taken was my death to lead me to it.

I concentrated on the images I had seen in the old man's memory—the loving wife, their children, their children's children, the good friends he'd been a good friend to in return. "It's not fair," I said to whoever might be listening. "I was not a good man, and you were right to take me. My life was wasted on me. But this is a good man. And he loves his life. And others love him. Don't let him go this way. Don't let his life be taken by someone like this."

I glanced up at Alan Hayes—he was rearranging his instruments, still humming happily, checking the strength of the chains designed to bind his victims to the altars, monitoring the levels of fuel in the camp stove's canisters, as fussy as if he expected guests.

Maggie. He had overheard the old man talking to her and knew she was on her way. He was preparing for Maggie.

I was close to panic at the realization, acutely aware of my ineffectual, nonphysical state, praying for two miracles now instead of one.

I don't remember what I said. I don't remember what I promised in the grand tradition of self-sacrificing and, ultimately, meaningless bargains with god. But I do know that as I prayed, I felt the life force in the old man reignite, as if somehow, deep within, despite his unconscious state, he had decided to fight back. It was the thinnest of flames at first, flickering wildly, threatening to go out, but then it strengthened and his energy steadied. He was weak, perhaps too weak to live for long, but he had stabilized.

I had to do more.

I withdrew into my hiding place, trying to think of a way to stop Hayes from hurting Maggie. I tried to access his mind, looking for a way to influence him, but Hayes carried no memories. His mind was blank. It did

not store the past. Not until he called it up for his pleasure. It did not have room for other people, either. It was almost as if he no longer needed to rely on thought. He simply did, and he simply succeeded, and thanks to his cunning, he simply survived.

Hayes gave the old man a look, then straightened his legs out so they would be more noticeable to anyone entering the cave. The old man was bait. Then Hayes rearranged his tools and removed his jacket, folding it neatly on the ledge. He rolled his shoulders, as if loosening them up, and stretched his arms out to each side, preparing for battle. He was ready for her.

I heard sounds outside. The little dog was returning. His barks, heard faintly at first, grew stronger as he reaped proached the cave, leading someone to it.

It had to be Maggie. And I had to find a way to warn her.

I left the cave, followed the sound of the barking, and discovered them less than a hundred yards away. I tried to distract the terrier, to get him to chase me, but the dog was no longer interested in me. He knew his owner was in danger and he knew that Maggie represented help.

Maggie was calling out the old man's name as she pushed through the brush. Brambles tore at her face and branches grabbed at her hair, but she continued onward, barely noticing. Occasionally, she would look up at the rocky crest of the hill that loomed over her, gauging how far she'd wandered from its base. She grew closer and closer to the cave, drawn onward by the dog, her voice more worried as she continued to call out without ever getting an answer.

She stopped abruptly, just a few yards from the clearing, to answer her cell phone. "I can't stop now," she told the caller without hesitation. "I'm not getting an answer and he may need help. Look, I left a trail of broken branches a blind man could follow. Just get here as soon as you can. I've got to keep looking. He's a civilian. I can't leave him up here alone."

She hung up and continued to call out the old man's name, the little dog's barks acting as punctuation at the end of each of her cries. When she broke into the clearing, her hand went instantly to her gun. Alan Hayes had not replaced the branches hiding the entranceway—he wanted her to come through that cave door. She would know it was too dangerous to enter the

cave alone—but she would do it anyway. She felt responsible for the old man’s safety. She’d risk being trapped to protect him.

Maggie quieted the dog and continued to call out the old man’s name. Cautiously, holding her flashlight above her head with one hand and her gun in the other hand, she inched into the entranceway. I rushed past her, into the cave, hoping to find a way to stop her from entering or, somehow, to stop Alan Hayes from overpowering her.

He was nowhere to be seen. I remembered the recess in the walls. He was waiting in the darkness of it, his breathing as deep and even as if he were meditating. His pulse was almost sluggish. His mind was blank. His body temperature had dropped to below normal.

Predatory stasis, I thought to myself. Hayes was a perfectly calibrated killing machine, waiting for the on switch to engage.

Somehow I would stop him.

I melded into Hayes, insisting on occupying the same place in time and space. I paid a terrible price for it. Pain swallowed me instantly, filling every fiber of my being. My torso and legs felt as if they were on fire, yet my blood remained cold, much colder than when I’d been alive. I could feel it moving through me like ice, freezing everything it touched, leaving me paralyzed as if I, too, had turned to ice. Screams filled my head, obliterating my ability to think. They were high-pitched cries of agony, and below the terrible sounds of that suffering, I heard the sobs of hundreds more wailing in grief.

This was what Hayes fed on. This was what Maggie was walking into.

Hayes had left several of the lights on intentionally, hoping to lure Maggie inside. They illuminated the front half of the cave as she entered, creeping forward slowly, advancing only when she saw that the way was clear. She stepped forward and saw no one. She glanced toward the dark half of the cavern, examining it for signs of danger. The beam of her flashlight danced across the rock walls and the two stone altars. She caught a glimpse of the old man’s body crumpled behind one of them and, forgetting all else, rushed to him. Turning her back to us, she knelt beside the old man and placed her flashlight on the ground next to his head before she checked his pulse.

Hayes struck.

Maggie was in perfect physical shape, and she was armed, but Hayes had the advantage of surprise. It took him a single step to reach her. He knocked the gun out of her hand and it hit the flashlight, spinning it in a circle until it came to rest with its beam pointing mockingly toward the only way out. Before she knew he was even there, Hayes had his arm wrapped tightly around her throat and was pressing in relentlessly, choking off her air supply. Maggie bucked and kicked furiously, stomped backward with her heels, bit at his hands, twisted and turned, trying to inflict damage. She was strong, but not as strong as Hayes. Her struggles only infuriated him and made him more determined to bring her under his control. She could not break free. The lack of oxygen started to take its toll and her struggling grew weaker. Soon she would be his.

I was mad with rage. There was nothing I could do. I lacked corporeal substance. “Maggie,” I screamed, though I knew she could not hear me. “Fight him, Maggie. Fight him.”

I cried out for no one but myself. I felt the consciousness slipping from her as her life force dimmed and her strength began to ebb away. Alan Hayes now had his other arm wrapped over her chest, holding her half aloft, as he used his right arm to play with the pressure on her larynx. He did not want her dead. He wanted her alive—and under his control. I could feel the excitement rising in him, alive and unstoppable.

I would lose her.

I was mad with grief, I was cursing the heavens that kept me here to see it, when the cave exploded with sound, a reverberating blast that lingered even as a dark spot in the very center of Alan Hayes’s forehead bloomed and began to ooze blood.

His life was over in a heartbeat.

He wavered, released Maggie, and let her fall at his feet, then slumped against the rock wall and slid to the floor. He was dead by the time he hit the dirt, his life erased as completely as if someone had flicked a light switch off. He did not fight, he did not linger, he was not claimed by anyone or anything. I felt nothing leave him, nothing fighting to stay.

He was simply there one moment and gone the next.

Maggie lay sprawled on the floor, fighting her way back to consciousness, unaware of who her savior had been. Me? I was overcome at what I saw. At first, I did not recognize the figure rushing toward her from

the entranceway, gun in hand, panting from his journey up the hill. My mind refused to process that it was him. But as he drew closer, my mind acknowledged what I was seeing at last. I put together the overweight body, disheveled clothes, sweating face, ginger hair, the smell of stale liquor: Danny.

My old partner, Danny, was a hero.

“Oh, my god,” he said, sinking to his knees. “Are you okay? Maggie? Are you okay?” He held Maggie in his arms, propping her up gently as he shook her and probed for a pulse.

And in that second, I realized that, though Danny feared Maggie for some unknown reason I could not understand, he also loved her as I did. Some long-forgotten, long-dormant place inside him, still lit by hope, actually longed for her. I felt pity toward him for the all-too-human disappointment that awaited him. But I felt gratitude toward him, too. He had done what I had been unable to do—he had saved her.

I stepped out of the shadows, wanting to be with them both, to be a part of what they shared. But Danny made a sound so primal and terrified, it did not even sound human. He stared at me and started to tremble all over. His gun clattered to the dirt.

Danny could see me.

“It’s okay,” I said, stretching my arms out. “It’s just me, buddy. Your old partner.”

I don’t think he could hear me.

He started to mumble and backed away from me. He fell, clawed at the dirt floor, and scrambled to his feet, then ran to the cave’s only exit.

“I’m sorry,” he called back to me, his face flushed scarlet. “I’m sorry, Fahey. I’m sorry. For god’s sake, I’m sorry.”

“Wait!” I called to him, reaching out a hand, but he only fled out the door.

I followed, trying to make him understand that I was not going to hurt him. That I was grateful to him for saving Maggie’s life.

“Bonaventura!” I called after him, but Danny only ran faster, pushing his aging body in his panic, crashing through bushes and shrubs and brambles, shredding the skin on his arms and face, falling and scrambling back to his feet, hurtling himself forward again, looking back over his shoulder then, seeing me still there, gasping in panic as he pushed himself even harder.

“Danny!” I yelled. “Stop! I just want to help. I know I can help you. Let me.”

Danny reached the rocks marking the end of the paved hiking path and scrambled on top of one of the boulders. His breath was coming in ragged gasps and I knew his heart could not take much more strain. I could feel his pulse pounding, a miniature jackhammer racing toward implosion.

“Leave me alone,” Danny screamed as he clawed his way up the rocks, scrambling from boulder to boulder, going ever higher. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Just leave me alone. For god’s sake, I’m sorry.”

He reached the top of the hill. There was nowhere to go. The pinnacle ended in a steep cliff that fell off in a great slash of stone ending far below. He inched out to the edge of the cliff and stared down at the abandoned quarry a quarter mile beneath him. He was panting and his chest heaved up and down. Sweat poured over his face.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I pleaded as I reached the cliff and stepped toward him.

Danny turned to face me, his eyes filling with tears. His hands were shaking with fear. “I didn’t mean to,” he told me. “I panicked. I didn’t think it through. I just panicked. I wanted to take it all back the moment it was done.”

“I just want to thank you for helping Maggie,” I tried to tell him.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, his eyes locked on mine, and I knew he wasn’t just talking to me. He was talking to everyone he had ever known, everyone who had loved him and been disappointed, everyone he had failed during his life.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered a final time as he leaned back into space and began to fall.

“Danny,” I called out as I threw myself over the cliff after him. He was falling calmly, not thrashing, his arms perfectly still, as if he had made up his mind and was now determined to disappear, to sink as surely as a rock plummeting to a lake bottom.

I would not let him go alone.

I fell with him and time seemed to stop, losing its relevance. I entered Danny’s thoughts and became part of his memories, accessing his final recollection.

What unfolded was as real as it had been the first time around: I could feel the chill of a wintry row house along the banks of the Delaware, hear the scuttling of rats in the corners, smell the urine, see the discarded candy wrappers and other refuse. I could see the wide eyes of the drug dealer staring at us in the dim light of a fading day. I could smell his fear. He held a gun in his hand and he was pointing it first at Danny and then at me. Danny was pointing a gun back at him. I was standing a few feet away from them both, looking at one and then the other, confused.

“You take me down and you go down with me,” the dealer said to Danny. “I know who you are. I know your partner. You can’t touch me. Touch me and you pay the price.”

I made a sound of surprise, and that got his attention. As the dealer turned his head toward me, Danny shot him right through the heart and fired again, hitting the man in his forehead as he dropped to the floor. I stared at Danny in horror, then looked down at the dealer.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

The gun had slid out of the dealer’s hand and Danny walked over to it. He picked it up, looked at it for a moment, then turned and stared at me, puzzled, as if he had never seen me before.

“Danny?” I asked as he raised the dealer’s gun, took aim—and shot.

I fell to the floor, wounded in my right shoulder, and Danny squeezed the trigger again. This time, it was a shot straight through the heart. He walked over to my body and stared down at me, betraying no emotion, then leaned over until he was inches from my face. He said my name just once: “Fahey?” Satisfied that I was dead, he wiped the gun he still held with a handkerchief, then knelt down and placed the gun back in the drug dealer’s hand. He aimed toward me and took yet another shot, hitting the wall behind where I had been standing, leaving residue on the dead drug dealer and his clothing.

Danny stood up, rubbed the small of his back as if it was aching, then looked around the room, thinking. He walked over and swapped out his weapon for mine. He took the gun he’d used to shoot the dealer and laid it next to me, then took my own from my ankle holster and pocketed it. No one would know. We’d been together too long. And we were using unsanctioned weapons to begin with, smaller revolvers that were easier to conceal and, as Danny often said, easier to aim.

He'd proved it that day.

He knelt by my body, checked my pulse once again, and found nothing. Only then did he pull a cell phone from his pocket and make the call. "Officer down," he shouted into the phone. "A bust went bad. Fahey is down."

Down. Yes, I was down—and then down some more. The memory of my last few minutes alive faded and Danny and I were falling again, falling into space, the rocks below rushing up at us, Danny's eyes locked on mine, his terror emanating from him in palpable waves.

"It's okay. I forgive you. And it's not so bad being dead," I tried to tell him, but time had started again and we had reached the bottom. For me, it was nothing. I was simply there, on the ground, looking down at Danny. For Danny, it was the end. He lay shattered before me, his body broken by the jagged rocks at the base of the cliff, his skull shattered by the impact.

My old friend. My partner. My killer.

He was gone. I had glimpsed the defining moment of his life or, perhaps, more accurately, the defining moment of his death: my own grim passing.

This was what Danny had been concealing from Maggie. This was what Danny had been afraid she might find. That was what had caused him to follow Maggie, to watch her to see what she discovered, to try to find out what she knew about his role in my death and his role in whatever dark partnership had led to my killing. He'd had nothing to do with Hayes except a need to stop Maggie from searching, to stop her and others from looking into our cases and noticing how many Danny had sabotaged.

I'd never known, never even suspected, never been sober enough to notice that my partner was not only unkempt, incompetent, and uncaring—he was also a dirty cop. The one thing I had prided myself on not being.

It had cost me my life.

I sat on a boulder near Danny's body, waiting for something to happen, contemplating the sorry mess I'd made of my life, wondering if it would be the same in my death.

I'd just driven a man to kill himself, and even if he'd been driven by his own guilt more than anything else, that did not erase my participation in it.

Yet, had Danny deserved to keep on living? It wasn't as if he treated life with any respect, most especially not his own. It was better for him to have died moments after saving Maggie's life. He had taken my life, but he had



saved hers. I'd be willing to trade my life for Maggie's in the great karmic stock exchange of the universe. I'd gladly pay that price. The world was better off without me, and it was most certainly better with her in it. If Danny had been an instrument of that balance, so be it. Redemption never came cheap.

I was still sitting on the boulder, staring at Danny's broken body, contemplating the great mysteries of life and death, when a small black nose appeared in my line of vision. The little terrier had made his way down the hill. Ever the tracker, ever the troublemaker, he now sat, staring enthusiastically at me, his tongue lolling from his mouth after his run, tail thumping the ground happily in goodwill.

"Now you want to be friends?" I asked the dog. "Now?"

I wanted to laugh. It was all too perfect: Terror. Joy. Sadness. Happiness. Luck. Happenstance. Rivalries. Friendship. Love. Hate. All wrapped together in one big crazy set of coincidences people called "life."

And, somehow, it all made sense.

Above me, around me, moving toward me, came loud voices followed by men and women in uniform, people shouting orders, people hurrying up the old road that snaked through the abandoned quarry, bodies crashing through the bushes toward where I sat, calling out to each other.

All evidence of life, this life, all evidence I had been left behind again.

I was not of the living and I was not of the dead. I was alone.

Even the little dog had left me, his attention captured by something in the darkness, just beyond my reach. He was barking furiously.

"Oh, my god," an officer cried out, her tone catching the attention of everyone who had gathered around Danny. "Oh, my god. Look over there."

Her flashlight illuminated the little dog against a grotesque tableau, the little beast overcome by the smell of an open graveyard created by Alan Hayes—the heaped remains of bodies thrown from the cliff overhead, tossed over the edge to spiral down and smash against the rocks below, joining the victims who had preceded them in death, hidden by rocks from the eyes of the living to decay unnoticed, to dry and be stripped away to bone by the sun and the wind and the passing of time and the gnawings of the creatures that moved in the darkness around me.

As if in slow motion, the assembled response team moved as one toward the scattered heap of skeletons that had tumbled to the bottom of the quarry

a few yards from where Danny lay, shining their flashlights on what was little more than piles of bones and scraps of flesh, now dried and desiccated.

“How many?” a deep voice demanded.

“At least four,” the first officer guessed, her voice quavering. “Maybe more. It’s hard to tell in this light.”

“Someone better call Gonzales,” a colleague mumbled. “And it’s not going to be me.”

I stared at the pile of human bones, discarded by Hayes, and thought of Vicky Meeks and what might have happened had she ended up with the others. No one would have known. No one would ever have suspected. Hayes would still be out there, still taking them, still torturing them, then throwing them out like garbage—if not for an old man and his dog taking a walk along the hill, surprising him one night before he could dump Vicky Meeks, forcing him to leave her in a meadow and run.

Life was like that, I realized, it could change direction in the touch of an instant. It could fail or succeed, meander or stay the course, all depending on the most mundane of consequences, the most casual of meetings, a shrug, a look, a misunderstood comment.

“Is that Bonaventura?” a newcomer asked the others, his flashlight playing over what was left of Danny.

“Yeah,” someone said. “He jumped.”

“Why?” the newcomer asked.

“Who knows?” someone answered. “Knowing him, the question is more like ‘why not?’ He was a mess. He checked out a long time ago.”

“Stop it,” the woman who had discovered the pile of broken bodies near Danny ordered. “Show him some respect. If not for him, we would never have found them.”

She played her flashlight over the grisly landscape, her face wet with tears. “Now they can rest in peace.”

## Chapter 38



My new four-legged friend and I made our way back up to the top of the hill, where Maggie stood at the end of the path, shooing away hovering EMS technicians as she explained to Gonzales what had happened in the cave.

The little dog earned my everlasting love by lifting a leg and relieving himself not three inches from Gonzales's loafers. The commander was too engrossed with Maggie's story to notice but I gave the terrier a big thumbs-up.

"I guess he'd been following me, sir," Maggie was saying. "He'd been MIA for a couple of days and I thought he was on a bender, but then he came through that door, gun drawn, and I don't remember anything else. When I came to, Hayes was dead and Bonaventura was gone. He had to have shot him. It wasn't me and no one else was there."

Gonzales heard the doubt in her voice. "You sure?"

She shrugged. "All I saw was Hayes, Bonaventura, and the old man. Or at least, the old man's body."

"He's going to be okay," Gonzales told her. "The old man is going to be okay."

"That's a miracle in itself," Maggie said.

"Lots of miracles tonight," Gonzales agreed. It was an uncharacteristic thing for him to say. Maggie noticed.

"What's that mean, sir?"

"Nothing, Gunn." Gonzales hesitated. "Look, I'm just going to tell you straight up—Bonaventura is dead."

Maggie was stunned. "What?"

"It looks like he threw himself off the bluff after shooting Hayes."

She stared at Gonzales. "Sir, that makes no sense."

“Not to you, it doesn’t,” Gonzales said gently. “But to Danny, it did.”

“And you know why,” Maggie guessed.

Gonzales patted her on the back and waved the waiting EMS techs over despite Maggie’s protests that she was fine. “Let it be,” he said to her. “Bonaventura died in the line of duty. That’s all the public needs to know.”

“I don’t get it,” Maggie said.

“You stopped a killer today, Gunn,” Gonzales explained. “They’ve found the remains of at least four more victims in the quarry. You made the department look good again. Bobby Daniels sees you as his new best friend. And who knows how many cases you’ve closed for other departments? You’ve done an outstanding job. Take the rewards and let the rest go. That’s my advice.”

“What rewards?” Maggie asked suspiciously. My heart swelled with pride: my girl was not big on payoffs.

“You tell me,” Gonzales offered. “What do you want? A promotion? New assignment? Want to head up a special squad?”

Maggie said nothing.

“Think about it,” Gonzales suggested smoothly. “Get back to me on it.”

The little terrier had been ignored long enough. He sat on Maggie’s foot and barked twice. The two cops stared down at him.

“It’s the old man’s dog,” Maggie said. “It led me to the cave.”

“Is that right?” Gonzales said in an unctuous voice as visions of press-friendly canine award ceremonies danced in his head. “I think someone deserves a medal.” He tried to pet the little terrier, but the dog growled and Gonzales snatched his hand away.

Maggie laughed. “I’ll take him, sir. I’ll make sure the old man gets his dog back. Something tells me this little fellow has been through enough. Let’s spare him animal control.” When she bent down, instead of growling, the little dog leapt into her arms, and Maggie took off down the hill, pursued by irritated medical personnel still trying to get a look at her.

Gonzales watched her go, clearly irked that she had one-upped him, even if it was with a lowly dog. The little dog’s tail wagged wildly back and forth as Maggie carried him down the path: the terrier was enjoying the royal treatment.

She met Morty halfway down the hill. The old beat cop was running up the incline, his face flushed deep red. “Maggie! Your father’s going to kill

me. What have you done now?”

“It’s okay,” Maggie told him. “I’m fine. Hayes is dead.”

“Good. Come on,” Morty said firmly. “I told your father I’d bring you by in person so he could see for himself that you’re okay. He’s gotten calls from so many people giving him conflicting information that he’s not going to calm down until he sees you in person.”

“That’s cool.” Maggie lifted the little dog aloft. “I’ve got a little fellow for him to babysit for a few days. But you’re going to have to bring him to Dad for me. I need to stop off somewhere else first.”

Morty stared at the dog. They sized each other up. “He looks like trouble,” Morty said, but his voice was friendly and the terrier wagged his tail in reply.

“He is trouble.” Maggie laughed. “But you and I both know that Dad loves troublemakers.”

“That he does,” Morty agreed.

Morty drove off with the dog, who was happy to throw his lot in with his new friend. I threw my lot in with Maggie. I was pretty sure I knew where she was headed and within minutes my guess was confirmed—the facade of the hospital loomed skyward before us, as stark and forbidding as a monolith built to appease the gods. Most windows were dark, but the lights above the emergency room were shining bright in the night like a beacon.

They would not let her see the old man yet. They were still working on him in a treatment room. But Maggie had other people to visit as well. I followed her up three floors and down a deserted hallway. Sorrow filtered out of each room, clinging to me like wisps of cotton candy. The people here were sick, and more than a few were weighing whether it was worth staying alive when staying alive meant so much pain. But the sorrow did not come from them, it came from those who loved them and had visited earlier, leaving their fear behind.

Two night nurses were bent over their charts at a well-lit station. When they saw Maggie, one barely looked up, but the other clearly knew her well. “Hey, Maggie. How have you been?”

Maggie stopped to talk. “Same as always, Lexi. Working hard. Catching bad guys. Bad girls, too, these days.”

The nurse smiled at her. “Your mother would be proud of you.”

“Thank you,” Maggie said, a catch in her voice. And then it was there: a flash of memory so brief I barely had time to catch on to it and understand what I had seen: a frail woman lying alone in a hospital bed, surrounded by darkness lit only by the electronic screens of the machines keeping her alive. Her face was emaciated and pulled tight against the bone, the skin as dry as parchment, the mouth hanging open as she waited for breath. Maggie stood by her, holding her hand, staring down at the body struggling to hold on to life in the bed before her. “It’s okay, Mom,” Maggie was whispering. “You can let go.”

In an instant, the memory was gone. Maggie would not allow it to linger any longer.

“What are you doing here tonight? I didn’t see you when I came on duty.” The nurse was staring at Maggie, waiting for an answer.

Maggie shook off her memory and managed a smile. “A friend was brought in earlier tonight. I’m here to see her. I know it isn’t visiting hours.”

The nurse looked down at her papers, amused. “It’s okay, Maggie. I wouldn’t let a little thing like visiting hours stop you now.”

Maggie was still smiling when she entered Peggy’s room. She was asleep, her body sprouting endless cables and tubes that connected her to a cluster of machines humming by her bedside. She did not wake when Maggie took her hand, but her vitals were strong and I could feel her fighting the injuries that threatened her body. Peggy would be fine. Peggy would live to once again explore the miniature landscapes of the lab she loved so much.

Maggie was at home in a hospital room. She pulled up a chair and sat for a few moments, doing nothing more than holding her friend’s hand, letting the darkness surround them, absorbing the calm and the quiet. Maggie pulled the safety of the room around her like a cloak, gaining strength from her surroundings.

I sat at the foot of Peggy’s bed, watching Maggie, wondering how she had managed to train herself to shut off her memories whenever they got in the way of the present. It would keep her a mystery to me.

After fifteen minutes, Maggie left her friend and, waving a quick good-bye to the nurses, returned to the first floor, where the fear and the jangled remnants of violence hung in the air, choking away the peace I had gained watching Maggie with Peggy. The emergency waiting room was dotted

with people in various stages of drunkenness or shock. Maggie ignored them all as she made her way toward a group of people clustered together, looking frightened at the far end near the vending machines.

It was the old man's family. They were sitting in two long rows, facing one another, finding the strength in each other to face what might be coming. They ranged in age from the frailest of old ladies down to a sleeping boy who could not have been more than a few years old. His face was slack with the blissful unconsciousness of childhood sleep and drool trickled out of his mouth onto his mother's shoulder. He slept, secure in the knowledge that he was completely and utterly safe. There would be time enough for him to discover the truth about life. For now, I envied him his innocence.

I stared at the others, separating out the generations who had followed the kind old man: sons, daughters, their spouses, their children, their children's children.

And then I saw her.

She was sitting next to a trim man who was deeply tanned, holding his hand. Her long legs were stretched out in front of her and her brown hair fell in silky curtains over her face. Her boyfriend sat awkwardly next to her, wanting to be a man and lend her comfort, but unsure of what to do.

It was the young girl Alan Hayes had stalked, the young girl from the school bus who had befriended Sarah Hayes and escaped death at the hand of Sarah's father by seconds.

Maggie saw her at the same time I did, but her eyes slid away: she was going to let the girl recognize her first.

I don't think the girl had told her father about what had happened when he had left her alone. She gave Maggie a quick smile, out of nervousness more than friendliness, and her eyes glanced quickly at the tall man sitting beside her. Maggie smiled and passed her by. She would not interfere.

She bent over the frail old lady, who was sitting huddled in a plastic hospital chair, a shawl arranged over her lap for warmth. As Maggie introduced herself to the old man's wife and explained who she was, I stared at the beautiful young girl holding her father's hand, waiting to hear news of her grandfather's condition—and I thought back to what I had stumbled on earlier that day: that life was shaped by a series of the most minor of coincidences, the tiniest of actions, the barest touching of one life

by another, the seemingly inconsequential decisions of others. This beautiful young girl, her heart pure, her mind still unblemished by what life would bring her, would live out her days because her grandfather had had the courage to stay by that cave. Her grandfather had surely saved her life. And yet she would never know.

I wondered then if there really was such a thing as coincidence. But I was not yet convinced about the alternative.

Maggie did not want to intrude. She stayed long enough to hear a progress report from the attending physician—the old man would live, but recovery would be slow. If he was strong, he would make it.

I looked at the family clustered around the doctor, listening to his every word with anxious faces, and I knew the old man would make it back. Look what he had to live for. And look at the strength they were willing to give him. He had, indeed, lived his life well and he would continue to live it well, dying one day in his sleep, slipping away without sorrow, as a good man should.

They did not notice when Maggie left. I sat beside her quietly in her car, feeling the need in her to find her own family, to draw comfort from others who loved her. We made our way to the little house with the still-unkempt lawn where Maggie's father lived and prayed for her safety every day.

They were waiting for her on the front porch, a trio awake in the dead of the night, a trio holding vigil for the one they all loved: Maggie's father, Morty the beat cop, and the little terrier. The dog had made friends with Maggie's father and was perched happily on the old man's lap.

"You didn't have to wait up," Maggie said as she joined them on the porch and scratched behind the little dog's ears.

"Oh, yes, we did," her father said firmly. "Here." He held out a bottle and Maggie took it. She surprised me: she unscrewed the top, looked up at the stars, then threw back her head and took a gulp.

It made her gasp and the two men laughed.

"Here's to surviving another day," Maggie said as she handed the bottle back to her father.

"I'll drink to that," he agreed. He took a swig, then screwed the top of the bottle back on. It was another of their rituals, I realized, a toast to their survival. The bottle was still three-quarters full. I hoped it would be big enough to last them through every close brush with death.



Maggie sighed, not quite believing that it was all over at last. She pulled a rocking chair over so that she and Morty could sit, flanking her father's wheelchair, rocking together, their back-and-forth motions synchronized with easy familiarity.

I sat on the bottom step leading up to the porch and pretended I was one of them. They felt so bound to one another. I just wanted to be a part of that for a little while.

Morty did not hold back. "If Bonaventura threw himself off a cliff, it had to be for a damn good reason."

"Fahey," Maggie's father said. "That's the reason: Kevin Fahey."

"Exactly," Morty agreed. "He had something to do with Fahey's death. When our Maggie started pawing through the case files, he started getting spooked. That's my guess."

"I always thought there was something more to Fahey's death," Maggie's father said. "When three people walk into a house and only one comes out alive, he's usually the one who did the shooting. Danny's story never quite hung together."

"He was dirty," Morty said.

Maggie's father nodded. "He was dirty."

"Bonaventura or Fahey or both?" Maggie asked. "Because I don't get that vibe from what I'm hearing about Fahey. He was troubled, but I'm not convinced he was dirty."

"Bonaventura wasn't in it alone," Morty said. "They never are. If he was dirty, there were others. Count on it."

"It's not fair to tag Fahey just because of his partner," Maggie protested.

"You sound like you need to know," her father suggested gently.

"I do," Maggie said. She sounded surprised at her own words. "I can't explain it. I feel like, somehow, I don't know . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Just say it," Morty suggested. "You're speaking to one old man who talks to his dead wife and another who chats with his dead mother each morning."

Maggie's father looked at his friend. "I knew not even death could stop your mother from nagging you, Morty." The old friends laughed together.

"I just feel like I had some help with this case," Maggie said. "I can't explain it any better than that."

Morty nodded. "I won't argue with that. It's happened to me."

"I'm going to ask Gonzales for that as my reward," Maggie said suddenly.

Her father started to laugh.

"What's so funny about that?" she demanded.

"It's probably the one thing Gonzales doesn't want to give you."

"I don't care. He said I could have anything I wanted. And I want to look into Fahey's death."

Maggie's father was shaking his head. "Ah, Maggie. You were the most stubborn little girl I ever saw. If I had known then that your stubbornness would one day give a man like Gonzales grief? By god, I'd have encouraged it a hell of a lot more."

They all laughed together and the sound gathered, then swelled, rising up into the night like a cloud of goodwill sent off into the darkness. Oh, how I had squandered the opportunity to laugh while I was alive.

Maggie rose and stretched, then rubbed the small of her back.

"You're not going to do it now?" her father asked, incredulous.

"I have a lot of paperwork to file on this," Maggie said defensively. "Might as well get it done."

"You're not going into the office to do paperwork." Her father shook his head, half proudly, half in exasperation. "You're going to look at Fahey's file."

"I am," Maggie said cheerfully. "I want to know what happened. I want to know why Danny threw himself off a cliff. I want to know why Fahey had to die."

"You act like you knew the guy," Morty said. "Like you owe him something."

"I do owe him something," Maggie explained. "I owe him the truth. From one cop to another. I owe him the truth."

"You're a piece of work, Maggie May," her father said gently. "You, my daughter, are a piece of work."

And so she was. As we walked to her car together, I knew she could not see me. Indeed, she did not even suspect I was there. But that was okay. We were still a team. She did not walk alone.

I thought back to earlier that night, after Alan Hayes and Danny had died. As I followed Maggie to her car, I had passed by the field where I had first seen the body of Vicky Meeks. It had been beautiful in the moonlight, every

stalk of grass and swaying weed illuminated in the glow, rendered stark by light and shadows. It felt peaceful. Nature reigned there once more, the violence of man eradicated by the passing of day, followed by night, followed by more days and nights. I had found that comforting.

I had also seen a young woman standing on the opposite edge of the patch of flattened weeds where Vicky Meeks had lain. Her face was hidden in shadow. I'd wondered if she was human or more like me, but I did not have to wonder long. The moon was bright in the sky and I turned my face up to it, my attention caught by what had seemed like a single flash of silver moonbeam. When I turned my attention back to the clearing, the girl was gone.

"How long would I be left behind?" I had wondered. How many years would I be doomed to watch others move on while I wandered this plane alone?

Now I thought I knew. I thought of the stack of haphazardly solved cases filling my old file drawers, and of the many more that remained unsolved.

My redemption lay in those files, I thought. I had set things right for Alissa Hayes and I had helped Vicky Meeks. But my penance had just begun.

I could have felt overwhelmed. I could have felt disappointed. But the truth was—I felt elated. I had a purpose. For the first time in my life, and the first time in my death, I had a purpose. Kevin Fahey, the dead detective. The righter of wrongs, most especially my own. Defender of those who have gone before me into the darkness.

And protector of Maggie Gunn. Her very own, most imperfect but most dedicated guardian angel.

I could do it. I could do that job well. And I would do it, too. I would always be there for her, for as long as I could. Because some people believe in angels. Some people believe in god. Others believe in evil and the power of prayer. But me?

I believe in Maggie. And that's all I need to know.

## Epilogue



A woman sits alone at a desk in a deserted room, poring over the files spread open before her. It is nearly dawn and she has worked through the night, living only in the world described before her. She has spent hours now, her thoughts caught in a dirty abandoned house on the banks of the Delaware River years before. She can almost smell the whiskey sweat of fear radiating off the men gathered there. She has gone through it in her mind over and over. One drug dealer, also a murderer. Two police officers, one also a victim. Guns. Bullets. Death. Betrayal. Greed.

What else was in that room?

She shuffles the papers once more, rereading a statement, then checking the report of the crime scene investigators. She stares at the photos of a grime-encrusted wall, the flowered wallpaper peeling off in strips, pockmarked by bullet holes.

Something is wrong and she will not sleep until she finds it.

That's it, she thinks at last, tapping a photograph with her index finger, feeling the truth in her epiphany as it flashes through her mind. Too many bullets. Too many bullets for two dead men to have fired.

She knew then what had happened.

Gonzales would want to block the truth.

But the truth was that Kevin Fahey had been a clean cop. And she owed it to him to make sure that the world knew it, too.

She would not let Gonzales stop her. She could not.

At the very least, the dead deserved the truth.